

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Righteous Consumption: Consumer Activism in the United States and England, 1880-  
1920

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in

Sociology

by

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2015



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AUCE	Amalgamated Union of Co-operative Employees
CSU	Christian Social Union
CWS	Co-operative Wholesale Society
NCL	National Consumers' League
NUBSO	National Union of Boot and Shoe Operators

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Righteous Consumption: Consumer Activism in the United States and England, 1880-1920

by

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In capitalist societies, consumers use a range of goods mass produced under conditions of they know very little. Over the last two centuries, many consumer activists have sought to remedy this ignorance and promote ethical purchasing as a solution to problems such as labor exploitation, poverty, and public health issues. This dissertation examines the late nineteenth and early twentieth century origins of modern consumer activism as it arose out of consumers' encounter with anonymous goods. By comparing

three pioneering groups of consumer activists – the National Consumers’ League, the Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women’s Co-operative Guild – we can see how this basic problem of anonymous mass-produced goods shaped their activism. It draws on the extensive archival records of these groups as well as their contemporaries to trace and compare the dynamics of their activism. Despite their contrasting origins, character, and structure, these turn-of-the-twentieth-century activists defined the problem of anonymous goods similarly. Activists also pursued similar strategies to encourage others to purchase ethically-made goods: to make consumers see through the anonymous commodities into the conditions under which distant workers labored. Although they were confronted with similar problems, activists sometimes pursued different paths in accordance with their contrasting origins, character, and structure. Thus, when in conflict with labor unions and businesses or with unruly consumer desires, these groups pursued distinctive solutions to the basic problem of anonymous goods. Ultimately, this dissertation shows that activists pursued similar strategies when they addressed the problem of anonymous goods directly. However, when they appealed to consumers, laborers, or other groups, they differed along familiar lines such as class, gender, national origin, and organizational form.

## Introduction

The ethical consumer has become a commonplace figure in capitalist societies. One can choose from a variety of ethically-made goods – food, clothing, beauty products, jewelry, shoes, smart phones, pet products, office supplies, and much more. To locate these ethical goods, one can consult an ever-increasing selection of guides for buying in accordance with a variety of ethical principles. More simply – although perhaps not as reliably – one can look on product labels, some of which proudly announce their ethical origins. At the same time, many marketers promote products so as to suggest that they are, under some description, ethically-made. Terms such as “greenwashing” have sprouted up to characterize marketers’ dubious suggestion that they produce environmentally-friendly products. “Made In” labels and advertising campaigns offer consumers the opportunity to support national businesses.

The ethical consumer has been routinized. It has become a lifestyle choice for middle- and upper-class consumers (Adams and Raisborough 2008; Brown 2011). It has become a brand-identity of its own associated with high-status or refined consumption. Thus, it is easy to think of the ethical consumer as non-contentious, innocuous, therapeutic, and deeply misguided (Bauman 2008; Devinney, Auger, and Eckhardt 2010; Szasz 2007; Zizek 2009). Moreover, it becomes easy to fall prey to the thought that the ethical consumer has always been many, if not all of those things. Perhaps, any attempt to “politicize” consumption would devolve into an individual, self-interested politics.

To shake ourselves free of this stultifying and ultimately inaccurate vision, we can look backward to the public ascension of the ethical consumer at the turn of the twentieth

century. In England and the United States, groups of activists' emerged proudly seeking to rouse consumers' from their ignorance, whether self-imposed or involuntary. These activists asked people to identify as consumers and on the basis of this shared identity work to reform their societies. To members of the National Consumers' League, the Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative Guild, the consumer was a *universal figure with moral responsibilities to distant others* and the social power to remake the working conditions of those distant others. Although not explicitly contentious, this ethical consumer made implicit claims that threatened the individualism of competitive capitalist societies. Or so these activists thought. Before the ethical consumer became routine, a consequence for which these activists bear some responsibility, they styled the ethical consumer as a challenge. To examine why they thought this way is to learn about their experiences of capitalist societies in ascendance. It offers an opportunity to witness the curious blend of stasis and dynamism that characterizes capitalist societies (Sewell 2008) – the problems that consumer activists identified are with us still. Their projects to create ethical consumers thus enable us to perceive capitalism as an abstract system and a concrete experience of the modern world.

But turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists were significant for other historical and analytical reasons as well. The historical significance of these activist groups lies in their novel identification as consumer movements. As we will see, this means that these groups asked people to identify as consumers and that they claimed to represent people as consumers. Moreover, they initiated campaigns with consumer-oriented strategies to remedy social injustices and, in particular, to reform working

conditions. While British colonists in America, anti-slavery abolitionists, religious reformers, and laborers anticipated turn-of-the-twentieth-century activists' use of consumer-oriented strategies, these predecessors neither asked people to identify as consumers, nor did they claim to represent people as consumers (Breen 2004; Glickman 2009; Glickman 1997; Gurney 2015; Sussman 2000; Young 2006). Most commonly, these predecessors remained committed to addressing and representing people as imperial subjects, Christians, women, laborers, or other identities. As many historians have pointed out, the novel emergence of the consumer in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is bound up with central developments in the nineteenth-century capitalism – especially the rise of the trust and mass production (Gurney 1996; Joyce 1980; Leach 1994; Livingston 1997).

The historical novelty of turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activism plays into one aspect of its analytical significance as well. These activists helped to codify the consumer as a modern, self-standing actor. According to Meyer and Jepperson, an entity becomes an actor when it achieves an “authorized, agentic capability” (2000:102). Taking the consumer as an example, a consumer becomes a modern actor: 1) when consumers have naturally valid functions and interests and 2) when consumers acquire the authority, responsibility, and capacity to act (2000:106). In their framework, the former corresponds to the rationalization of the natural world, while the latter corresponds to the rationalization of the spiritual world. While economists had long proclaimed the consumer as a basic economic agent, turn-of-the-twentieth-century activists identified the consumer as a moral or spiritual agent. Consequently, by studying

these activists we stand to appreciate a turning point in the status of the consumer as an actor. To put the matter differently, we can appreciate how turn-of-the-twentieth-century activists laid the groundwork for subsequent consumer movements. This story about the origin of the consumer as an actor establishes a comparative baseline for rethinking the continuities and discontinuities in consumer movements.

Thus, turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activism allows us to understand how ethical consumers came to be the routinized figures that they are today. To study them is to trace the formation of the consumer as an actor (Hirschman and Reed 2015:268). By insisting that all consumption was an ethical choice and that the consumer was a legitimate identity, consumer activists institutionalized a template that has been taken up repeatedly since. Furthermore, detailed knowledge of the historical novelty of early twentieth-century consumer activism allows us to explore how an abstraction like “capitalism” can prompt and shape people’s actions in observable ways. These activists afford us a unique opportunity to explore how some people experience to real abstractions of capitalist societies as ethical problems – particularly the subjection of humans and goods to the logic of exchange value. These activists were alive to the promises and the pitfalls of the ethical consumer. And their urgency brings these ethical engagements with capitalism into stark relief.

Turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists

So who were these turn-of-the-twentieth century consumer activists? The National Consumers’ League, Co-operative Wholesale Society, and Women’s Co-operative Guild were three groups that sought to mobilize ethical consumers in new ways

during the period from 1880s until the end of World War I. Both the National Consumers' League and the Woman's Co-operative Guild offered full-throated accounts of consumer power, universality, and ethical duties. Furthermore, the Co-operative Wholesale Society joined this chorus by casting themselves as a consumer movement. While brief, the following remarks provide some basic historical information about these groups themselves, their historical context, and their distinctive contribution to the history of consumer politics. I keep these remarks brief because there are extensive histories written about each of these groups. For a more robust history of each group, the reader can investigate the work cited therein. For my purposes, I offer these brief histories to elaborate on the sociological significance of their campaigns to make consumers ethical.

#### The National Consumers League

The National Consumers' League grew out of attempts to reform the working conditions of salesgirls and messenger boys as well as industrial working conditions.<sup>1</sup> In 1890, a number of women founded the Consumers' League of New York City. A federated National Consumers' League emerged nine years later. It incorporated a host of regional and local groups of mainly middle- and upper-class white women who sought to reform workplace conditions by encouraging ethical purchasing and state regulation of labor conditions. The group contributed in numerous ways to the efflorescence of voluntary reform work associated with the progressive era (Hofstadter 1955; Rodgers 1998; McGerr 2003). They did so by investigating working conditions, publicizing the

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<sup>1</sup> For League histories, see Nathan (1926); Storrs (2000); Kish Sklar (1998); Dirks (1996)

frequently disturbing results, and organizing campaigns for ethical purchasing and legislative changes. Their primary tasks were to “investigate, agitate, and educate.” In their constitution, they emphasized “the duty of consumers to find out under what conditions the articles they purchase are produced and distributed.”<sup>2</sup> To this end, they pursued a range of tactics designed to educate consumers about their moral and causal complicity in the exploitation of workers. This attempt to educate consumers took a range of forms, from lectures and published investigations to exhibitions of sweated goods and public meetings.

The League did not participate in electoral politics—after all, many members were women who had but limited franchise during the period—but they did concern themselves with advancing legislation that protected workers. Their contribution to the political and cultural legacy of the progressive era far outpaced their organizational size. There were roughly 7,000 members in 1906 and upwards of 15,000 dues-paying members at the dawn of the First World War (Storrs 2000:26; Kish Sklar: 1998). The majority of these Consumers’ Leagues were located in the Northeast and Midwest. However, there were Consumers’ Leagues from Kentucky and Georgia to Colorado, Oregon, and California up through the First World War. If one relies on membership numbers alone, one would underestimate the reach of the League. They often drew on larger networks of clergy and women’s clubs to disseminate league campaigns broadly.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, their participation in public life ensured that League members could shape

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<sup>2</sup> *NCL Annual Report, 1900-01*

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Florence Kelley, “The Committee of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs on the Industrial Problem as it Affects Women and Children”, *American Journal of Nursing*, Vol. 1, No. 11 (Aug. 1901), pp. 813-815

the enforcement of existing legislation. Members often served on committees designed to investigate the efficacy of factory and workplace regulations. Their relations with legal and political figures such as the lawyer and Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis enabled the League to contribute to the development and defense of legislation that protected workers, especially women and children. Most famously, League members contributed to Louis Brandeis' famous court brief in *Muller v. Oregon* (1908). In defense of a maximum hours law for women, Josephine Goldmark (a member of the NCL) compiled an exhaustive array of empirical data on the ill-effects of overwork on women. Much of the investigative work had been undertaken by members of the NCL. Such prodigious work ensured that the League had an outsized influence on life and politics in the progressive era and beyond. In addition to their national influence, the NCL inspired Consumers' Leagues in France, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, and elsewhere in Europe.

#### The Co-operative Wholesale Society

The Co-operative Wholesale Society has its roots in mid-nineteenth century England. A group of working men sought to pool their purchasing power in order to cut out middlemen and find better prices on staple goods.<sup>4</sup> The group developed local co-operative stores where members could purchase food, clothing, and household items. The stores were collectively owned by the members, who received a quarterly dividend on purchases made in the store. For the period from the 1880s through 1914, the majority of members were men. Many local societies restricted membership to men alone, with

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<sup>4</sup> For histories of the Co-operative Wholesale Society during this period, see Redfern (1913); Webb (1930) Gurney (1996); Briggs and Saville (1971).

women granted membership in the event of a spouse's death. These local stores were incorporated into the CWS and members were encouraged to participate in annual meetings, local co-operative projects, and their communities. Like the National Consumers' League, the Co-operative Wholesale Society devoted an immense amount of energy to education. The CWS was involved in publishing a bevy of newspapers and journals, each of which entailed an opportunity to educate the public. Local co-operative societies published their own newspapers and reports. Peter Gurney reports that, by 1900, 32 co-operative societies published monthly or quarterly records with a total circulation of 384,000 per month. These newspapers and records encouraged participation in the co-operative movement, from purchasing goods at the stores to attending co-operative exhibitions. They suggested the personal and political virtues of participation. Officially, the Co-operative Wholesale Society remained aloof from politics until 1917, an issue which I address in the final chapter.

While they were always a working-class organization, by the 1880s and 90s the CWS began to tout the co-operatives as an organization of consumers. In 1913, prominent co-operator Percy Redfern employed this now common understanding to describe the ultimate purpose of the Co-operative movement. Redfern described the early co-operators as "voyagers" who came across an organic commonwealth accidentally "when they discovered the consumer, and found that everybody is a consumer and that an organization of consumers is an organized whole."<sup>5</sup> Upon the outbreak of the First World War, the Co-operatives could claim over three million members and their total capital

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<sup>5</sup> Percy Redfern, *The Story of the C.W.S. 1863-1913*, (Manchester: The CWS, 1913), p. 291

placed them as one of the twenty largest companies in England (Gurney 1996:19-20). The majority of these co-operative societies were located in northwest England, the heart of industry. In 1914, for instance, there were over twice as many co-operative societies in the North-Western region of England (485) as in either the South (205) or Midlands (218).<sup>6</sup> In addition to the extensive retailing, the Co-operative Wholesale Society developed a number of co-operative industries. These industries produced a wide range of goods including biscuits, boots and shoes, tea, soaps, tobacco, bacon, furniture, flour, and clothing.<sup>7</sup> As we will see, the Co-operative approach to managing workers sometimes came into conflict with their commitment to consumers—especially when trade unions sought to organize co-operative productions or even store employees. Coupled with their contributions to working class culture in England, the size and scope of the C.W.S. made them an important public voice for consumer politics in the era.

#### The Women's Co-operative Guild

As an auxiliary branch of the co-operative movement, the Women's Co-operative Guild may seem like a mere extension of the Co-operative Wholesale Society. After all, the Guild was formed in response to the exclusion of women from direct membership in co-operative societies. In most co-operative societies, women were permitted to be members only through their spouses, although a membership was no necessary to shop at co-operative stores. To facilitate women's participation in the co-operative movement, several women formed an association in 1883. By 1884, the group became known as the Women's Co-operative Guild. Like their brethren in the CWS, the Guild was committed

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<sup>6</sup> Report of the Central Board, *The Forty-Sixth Annual Co-operative Congress*, 1914, p. 80.

<sup>7</sup> "Talks on Co-operation", E.C. Sharland, 1898, p. 11

to the co-operative movement. In many ways, the Guild amplified the work of the Co-operative Wholesale Society. Members of the Women's Guild sought to educate others about the co-operative movement. They published pamphlets, held public meetings, helped found co-operative stores in poor communities, and discovered a range of ways for women to participate in the movement without becoming members of the CWS. They arranged conferences and engaged in dialogues with the CWS. As I will show, these women were committed to the transformative power of consumers in ways that paralleled the NCL and the CWS.

But they did not always march in lockstep with their co-operative brethren in the CWS. The Guild often challenged the CWS on issues ranging from the labor conditions of co-operative employees to divorce laws. In 1914, the Guild refused to suppress their advocacy for reforms of the divorce laws, which made it difficult for working-class women, especially, to divorce their spouses for any reason. This resulted in a direct confrontation with the CWS and the Co-operative Union.<sup>8</sup> In more mundane ways, too, the Women's Guild remained distinct from the Co-operative Wholesale Society. Once formed, the Women's Guild had their own weekly section in the main intellectual organ of the Co-operative movement, *The Co-operative News*. The Guild retained their own records and pursued explicitly political campaigns such as advocating for women's suffrage. Throughout the period, the Guild developed a robust program of social activism

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<sup>8</sup> The Co-operative Union was a federated body that included representatives of the English and Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Societies, a range of distributive societies, and associations of producers. In contrast to the CWS, which concentrated on retail and at times production, the Co-operative Union was the "propagandist" wing of the co-operative movement. While not directly engaged in politics, this group used its power to support the co-operative cause. It played a controversial role in doing so. In either case, the C.W.S. was by far the largest member of the Co-operative Union and thus shaped the bulk of its advocacy. On this issue, see Webb (1904).

from investigations of workplace issues to the promotion of ethical purchasing. Their membership, while smaller than the CWS, grew to more than 30,000 members by the First World War.<sup>9</sup>

Why these consumer activists?

These activists did not invent consumer activism. In fact, historians often point to the eighteenth century as a seminal period in the development of consumer politics. E.P. Thompson described the moral economy of the crowd in late-eighteenth century food riots. Such food riots asserted the right to set moral limits on the prices of staple goods and remained within a feudal tradition (Thompson 1971). But at the same time, a range of other actors put a distinctive gloss on the relationship between ethics and purchasing. In colonial America, the British colonists turned the consumption of tea and other goods taxed by the British Crown into a political issue. The famous Boston Tea Party was merely one event that dramatized the way that colonists developed an American political identity through consumer politics (Breen 2004). In England, too, the growing abolitionist movement involved claims about the ethical virtues of abstaining from slave-produced sugar and rum (Sussman 2000; Stamatov 2013:159). In the nineteenth century, abolitionists continued to make such claims about the ethical significance of consumption. Quakers in America developed Free Produce stores, wherein one could purchase cotton and other goods not sourced from the American south. On the opposite side, some advocates of the confederacy advocated non-intercourse with the north (Glickman 2009). And this covers but a few of the most prominent examples. Working-

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<sup>9</sup> 32<sup>nd</sup> *Annual Report of the Women's Co-operative Guild, May 1914-15*, p. 3.

class movements such as the Chartists and early Co-operators made similar connections between ethics and purchasing (Gurney 2009). Thus, the relationship of ethics, politics, and purchasing had a robust history prior to the turn of the twentieth century.

But the context within which these twentieth-century consumer activists arose renders them especially significant for understanding the relationships between capitalism, consumer activism, and action. Historians identify the turn of the twentieth century as a crucial moment in the modern era, especially for consumption in the industrializing West (Benson 1988; Glickman 1997; Livingston 1997; Rappaport 2000; Rosenberg 2012). Furthermore, in wealthy industrializing countries such as the United States and England, the figure of the consumer loomed large with the rise of trusts, intensifying mass production, and department store culture (Benson 1989; Rappaport 2000: 142-177; Shapiro Sanders 2006). The development of marketing strategies and visual technologies, too, appealed to people as consumers (McGovern 2006; Crary 2000). During this period, England and the United States were the two wealthiest countries in the world, measured by GDP per capita (Maddison 2007:264). These increases in wealth, while uneven, increased the purchasing power of many and thrust a good number of others into the market for mass produced food, clothing, and leisure (Hobsbawm 1969:154-171). Thus, these vibrant projects to make consumers' ethical took shape in the heart of the industrial, capitalist West. Within this context, consumer activists appealed explicitly to people as consumers. As we will see, these activists made the relationship between ethics and purchasing explicit in this figure of the ethical consumer. Whereas earlier activists may have drawn a clear connection between ethics and purchasing, they

were content to appeal to people as members of a political or religious community. In this way, consumer activists made a decisive attempt to lend credibility to the consumer as an ethical actor. Scholars of consumption refer to this figure as the citizen-consumer (Cohen 2003). By advocating the figure of the ethical consumer, turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists challenged the unfavorable connotations of consumer, which according to Raymond Williams persisted through the late nineteenth century and into the middle of the twentieth (1983:79).

Yet these activists were not alone in using consumer-oriented strategies during this period and in these countries. In the U.S., unions helped remake working-class identity as a consumerist one in their campaigns for a “living wage.” (Glickman 1997) The boycott was a common strategy for many groups, from temperance advocates (Gusfield 1986) to trade unions. In the U.K., advocates of free trade appealed to British consumers with the promise of cheap bread (Trentmann 2008; 2001). Furthermore, trade unions in both nations employed consumerist tactics such as product labeling (Tyler 1995; Frank 1994). In fact, I will show that trade unions came into conflicts with the National Consumers’ League and the Co-operative Wholesale Society over union labels, though for different reasons. Based in the UK and, to a lesser extent, the United States, the Christian Social Union employed a range of consumer-oriented tactics from white lists to boycotts (Vincent 2006). Of these groups, however, the National Consumers’ League, Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women’s Co-operative Guild were committed to consumer-based activism and the consumer as a self-standing social role. As such, they offer the purest cases of modern consumer activism in both theory and

practice. Moreover, these groups worked to legitimate the consumer as a political identity and consequently played a role in staking out a public, political role for consumers.

### Lines of Inquiry

What can we learn by studying turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists?

Substantively, I seek to explain the dynamics of consumer activism as a transnational project concerned with developments in capitalist societies. Theoretically, I employ an interpretive approach to the analysis and explanation of consumer activism that identifies new questions and problems to pursue in the study of consumption as meaningful, political action.

#### a) The Paths of Consumer Activists

Substantively, I seek to explain when and why turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists pursued analogous and divergent paths of action. These groups emerged out of distinctive national traditions, social classes, gender backgrounds, political contexts, and they exhibited distinctive organizational features. The National Consumers' League originated in the United States and drew its membership from the upper-classes whereas the Co-operative groups were an English, working class organization. The National Consumers' League and the Women's Co-operative Guild were women's groups, while the Co-operative Wholesale Society consisted primarily of men. Only the Co-operative Wholesale Society operated stores directly, while the other groups promoted various forms of social engagement, including ethical purchasing. And yet they arrived at strikingly similar visions of the ethical consumer and strategies for

encouraging ethical consumption. At the same time, they commonly diverged in ways that reflected their distinctive characteristics and contexts.

To begin to answer this question, I show that we must understand the nature of the problems they faced as activists – especially their ethical engagement with crucial features of capitalist societies such as commodity fetishism, the expansion of markets, mass production, and sweatshops. These problems were not merely “economic”, but reflect activists’ sincere attempts to come to terms with the ethical implications of life in capitalist societies. For instance, when activists sought to make consumers’ aware of their complicity, they focused on the commodities that consumers’ purchased thoughtlessly; they sought to associate images of the social relations of production with commodities themselves. Because of their activism, consumers would be forced perceive these hidden social relations and become ethical consumers. In their attempt to unveil or represent the labor of distant workers, these activists’ address a practical issue for consumers in capitalist societies: the insensibility of the social relations of production to the consumers of the goods. In short, these groups sought to induce ethical purchasing by demystifying the commodity. This required them to focus on making commodities reveal their elaborate, insensible histories to consumers. At the same time, to understand their activism in terms of an ethical engagement with capitalism only explains their similar motivations and problems. It cannot help us explain their crucial divergences.

Thus to appreciate how the crucial differences between them shaped activists’ paths of action, we must understand these problems in terms of their engagement with specific audiences in specific contexts or situations (Joas 1996; Stark 2011). More

precisely, when consumer activists focused on the relations between consumers, commodities, and producers, their actions took strikingly similar forms that addressed central capitalist issues such as commodity fetishism, the expansion of markets, mass production, and sweatshops. Doing so required them to address the audience *via* the commodity. By contrast, when these same activists focused on problems with specific audiences (such as laborers, businessmen, ethical consumers, politicians), their actions diverged in accordance with each group's situation and characteristics. When facing dissatisfied representatives of trade unions, activists' class background differently structured the paths their actions took. Faced with the task of addressing trade unionists directly, as opposed to via the commodity, consumer activists' ethical engagements with capitalist societies receded into the background.

Finally, in the unsettled time of the Great War, the relevance of the activists' shared repertoire of ethical purchasing came into question. Unlike the recurring problems of the conflicts with labor, business, or consumers' lack of discipline, the War challenged activists' settled repertoire for engaging the everyday problems in their capitalist societies. In addition to the pragmatic question of audience, deep-seated questions of identity and organizational purpose surfaced. In the process, these groups were able to rethink and, in the case of the co-operatives, reaffirm the political and ethical centrality of the consumer. By contrast, the National Consumers' League substantively disengaged from direct consumer-oriented campaigns.

By describing and analyzing the problems that they encountered, I show when and how activists' actions were shaped distinctively by their concern with the developing

capitalist societies in which they lived. In particular, their shared concerns speak to role of consumption and mass-produced commodities in capitalist societies (Lukacs 1971; Postone 1993; Sewell 2008). In their shared attempts to create ethical consumers, the elaborated character of labor in capitalist societies shaped their strategies. And by incorporating a pragmatic concern with contexts and situations, I invoke capitalism to explain action without reducing all action to it and without bypassing activists' interpretations of economic phenomena. As such, I attempt to explain the striking formal similarities of activists' ethical projects while remaining sensitive to the real and consequential differences between them.

#### b) Novel Approaches to Analytical Problems

In the age of big data, the question of why one could or even, at times, should take an interpretive approach to sociological analysis has acquired an unprecedented urgency.<sup>10</sup> With the migration of information science into the human sciences underway, researchers have once again begun to rethink and in less charitable cases question the contributions that interpretive approaches can make to sociology (Watts 2014; Martin 2011). As such, some have mounted a defense of interpretive approaches as explanatory in their own right (Hirschman and Reed 2015; Reed 2012; Spillman 2012). Rather than enter that fray, I employ a problem-based, interpretive approach to raise new questions and approach long-standing questions about consumption and politics from a new angle.

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<sup>10</sup> By 'interpretive approach', I mean any form of analysis that acknowledges the dependence of social life on actors' interpretations. To explain social life through an interpretive or humanistic approach requires that the analyst incorporate actors' interpretations into his or her account. It requires, at root, an attempt to harmonize the analytical desire to reduce with the interpretive desire to understand. To draw an overly sharp contrast, the physicist need not "understand" the atomic particle to explain its behavior. For more detailed accounts, see Reed 2008; Risjord 2000; Ricoeur 1975.

To this end, in this section I elaborate on two themes that surface in the subsequent analysis of the mobilization problems faced by consumer activists: the meaning of consumption and the attempt to make consumption “political.”

For a variety of reasons, scholars of consumption tend to treat the meaning of consumption, i.e. its significance to those who do it, as basically unrelated to production processes. Such an approach has achieved its purest expression in the work of Jean Baudrillard, who glossed consumption as signifying activity (2001; 1975). While consumers may depend on producers, what those goods mean to them and what they do with those goods is a matter of many other things: social location, cultural taste, economic necessity, and the signifying properties of commodities in relation to other commodities. After all, we find that people use and engage with consumer goods in all manner of creative and imaginative ways (Radway 1991; Campbell 1987; Miller 1994; Graeber 2011). These uses and engagements could be traced back to the processes of production in only the most obvious and irrelevant ways. Thus it makes sense when Viviana Zelizer notes, “it is a common mistake to suppose that consumption forms a warm cultural island in a frigid economic sea” (2011:428).<sup>11</sup> Thus, the meaning of consumption becomes severed from production. It appears to be all about the consumer’s engagement with a system of objects and signs (Baudrillard 1998).

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<sup>11</sup> In the same passage, Zelizer writes, “Another common error portrays consumption as centering on acquisition of goods and services rather than on its uses. A much clearer understanding of consumption practices comes from recognizing how meaningful social relations pervade economic processes, including production, acquisition, and use of goods and services.” I fail to see how it could be an error, analytically, to distinguish between purchase and use. However, I suspect that Zelizer means to suggest that to focus on purchasing as non-“cultural”—to identify a purchase as merely instrumental and unrelated to one’s social relations, attachments, and values—would be an error. In any case, I do not take a hard line on the best way to define consumption. I seek only to caution against ignoring the distinction between purchase and use. In this work, I focus on consumption as purchase for the practical reason that my data says very little about use.

But this is not entirely the case. Thanks to a longstanding, skeptical attitude toward consumers and consumption, any account of the meaning of consumption would be remiss without an appreciation of the ways that these systems of objects and signs are manipulated. Since the early twentieth-century, in particular, critics have lamented how consumers were manipulated by advertisers (Horkheimer and Adorno 1947; Packard 1957; Ewen 1976; Frank 1997). Others have shown how iconic branding (Holt 2004) and marketing to children (Cook 2004) help establish tastes and influence what consumption means. Communities emerge around particular brands such as Apple, Harley-Davidson, or Vespa (Cova 1997; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Hebdige 1981). Yet even while acknowledging the manipulative character of advertising, scholars of consumption commonly treat consumers as savvy figures that forge the meaning of their purchases in the crucible of manipulation, intimate relations, and self-identity (Campbell 2004; Zukin 2004; Miller 1998).

So how can we treat consumption as meaningful, but bound up with production processes? Through my analysis of the techniques employed by turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists, I argue that we can turn to Marx's account of commodity fetishism to provide a meaningful account of consumption that incorporates the labor process (Marx 1977:1). Briefly, in one sense commodity fetishism supplies an account of the invisibility of the labor process at the point of consumption. The consumer cannot perceive the elaborated labor processes that resulted in anonymous, mass-produced commodities. This helps explain why consumers can and do ignore the production process in their accounts of what consumption means. At the same time, it also accounts

for the recurring tendency to wonder what lies behind the commodity. Even dismissive accounts of ethical purchasing demonstrate that many different modern consumers have concerned themselves, actively and idly, with the labor process (Devinney, Auger, and Eckhardt 2010; Glickman 2009; Stolle and Michelletti 2013). By taking commodity fetishism seriously, we can draw often latent concerns with the origins of goods into a discussion of what consumption means. In this light, consumer activists engage in a public struggle with other figures—advertisers, businesses, and consumers themselves—to establish, definitively, what consumption means.

Over the course of this work, I show how commodity fetishism explains some of the strategies that consumer activists used. Furthermore, I reveal how consumer activists balanced their concern for laborers with other “meaningful” aspects of consumption—especially social identity and manipulation by advertisers. To be clear, I am not claiming that commodity fetishism captures the true meaning of consumption. Nor am I claiming that all accounts of consumption must take commodity fetishism as a central theme. Rather, I am claiming that we can develop a richer account of what consumption means by attending to activists’ and consumers’ attempts to understand, imagine, and characterize the labor processes behind their goods. Therefore, the meaning of consumption need not begin and end with consumers and their immediate interlocutors—from advertisers in clandestine boardrooms to family, friends, and peers. From the private thoughts of individual consumers to the engaged actions of consumer-citizens, the invisible labor of distant others bounds the meaning of consumption. In capitalist

societies, this meaning is not simply imposed on goods by moralizing consumers, but arises out of consumers' engagement with anonymous, mass produced goods.

To circulate their preferred meaning of consumption, activists' employed a range of tactics (see chapter 2 and chapter 5, in particular). I focus on two mobilization issues in the activists' attempts to promote their "ethical" meaning of consumption. First, these activists' employed similar techniques that would allow consumers to "see" through the commodity to the working conditions behind it. In the language of social movements, they shared a set of framing strategies or ways of encouraging shared understandings (Tarrow 1992:187). My account of consumer activist dynamics reveals how these shared frames reflect activists' ethical engagement with commodity fetishism. By taking these connections between shared frames and developments in capitalism seriously, I illuminate one way to reconnect culture and the economy in the study of social movements. Second, activists' encountered a similar but frequently unacknowledged collective action problem: weakness of the will. Because of the coordination and repetition required to make ethical purchasing a successful tool for social change, activists' faced the problem of securing consistent ethical purchasing. These activists attempted to overcome this particular problem in a range of familiar ways – by employing incentives and appealing to sacred values. But their educational suggests another, less appreciated tactic: disciplining and transforming peoples' desires. By drawing on these mobilization problems as defined and faced by consumer activists, we can rethink two enduring analytical concepts related to mobilization in social movements:

More broadly, the study of early consumer activism allows us to rethink temporal and analytical distinctions in the study of consumerism, social movements and collective action. As we will see, turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists challenge accounts of consumer politics as bound up with what social movement scholars call new social movements (Calhoun 1993; Haydu and Kadanoff 2010; Melucci 1996; Touraine 1981). To illustrate this point, one can look at an important work on contemporary consumer activism by Michele Micheletti. Micheletti described contemporary consumer activism as a form of “individualized collective action.” (2003:24; Lekakis 2013) She contrasts individualized collective action with “collectivist collective action.” The latter relies on formal organizations with members and well-defined group norms to establish a “political home.” (2003:28) Collectivist collective action tends to have centralized, hierarchical but representative participatory structures that are grounded in specific places, events, and grand ideological narratives. One can think of a rally organized by a political party or a strike organized by a labor union as exemplars of collectivist collective action. The former occurs at the behest of the individual citizen who creates his or her own political home. Individualized collective action occurs via everyday activism and a diffuse, decentralized approach to politics. Rather than participate in organizational grand narratives, individuals self-consciously author their own involvement in politics and take responsibility for these everyday actions. One can think of ethical purchasing as the exemplar of individualist collective action.

Yet turn-of-the-twentieth-century activists confound such distinctions by bringing together such “collective” and “individualized” forms of group action. These were

hierarchical groups that sought out active members but they relied on members (and others) to engage in everyday activism. Moreover, these groups proffered grand narratives of progress, self-improvement, community over competition, and many others. They sought to build on ethical purchasing as a way in to a more robust political and community life. These groups hosted regular meetings, attended conferences, and participated in exhibitions. Consequently, they challenge us to rethink the claim that consumer politics in capitalist societies is essentially tied to decentralized, individuated forms of collective action. While it may require individualized politics, consumer activism need not consist only of individualized politics. Thus, these consumer activists' recall for us the variety of politics that *can* arise when we consider consumption ethically.

#### Methods and Comparisons

One more distinctive feature of my approach to consumer activism comes in the form of comparative strategy. Rather than compare these groups as coherent, bounded individual cases, I compare these groups in terms of analogous conceptual and practical problems that they faced throughout the period from the 1880s through the First World War. From defining the consumer and inducing ethical purchasing to confronting trade unions and educating the desires of their membership, these groups addressed similar problems. Sometimes they came upon similar solutions as in their strikingly familiar visions of the ethical consumer. Other times they “broke rank” as in their conflicts with trade unions. As such, throughout the dissertation I sometimes discuss these groups as a single case (consumer activists), sometimes as three distinct cases (National Consumers League, Co-operative Wholesale Society, and Women’s Co-operative Guild), and others

as two distinct cases (the National Consumers' League and the Co-operatives). I take my cues about how to arrange the comparisons on the basis of the problems that these groups confronted and their responses to these problems. These problems were recognized, debated, and addressed by these groups themselves, although not always in the terms that I use to characterize them. In the remainder of this section, I explain the purposes and virtues of a problem-based approach to comparison, particularly as a tool for explaining variations in courses of action and for identifying *when* conventional sociological variables such as gender, class, organizational form, and nationality matter.

I address five inter-related problems over the course of my dissertation. First, I focus on the techniques and strategies that these activists employed in their attempts to induce ethical purchasing. Second, I address the problem of motive. Is it possible to claim that these activists develop similar approaches to the ethical consumer? While consumer activists' did not pose this problem themselves, it allows me to elaborate on the distinctive historical context in which these groups developed. Third, I focus on how these groups defined and responded to conflicts with businesses and trade unions. Fourth, I address the problem of sustaining collective action. How did these groups encourage people to purchase ethical goods consistently? Fifth, I examine the outbreak of the First World War and its consequences for consumer activists. Such a comparative approach enables me to evaluate the dynamics of consumer activists' actions in light of their repertoire of ethical consumerism.

Canonical accounts of comparison in historical sociology tend to favor straightforward definitions of cases that coincide and differ in terms of a given set of

variables and attributes to produce an outcome of interest (Skocpol and Somers 1980; Ragin 1987; Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003). My cases do vary across a given set of attributes: social class, gender composition, nationality, and organizational type, most notably. Moreover, they share some crucial “outcomes” or phenomena to be explained: a vision of the ethical consumer, techniques for mobilization, an analogous set of problems (business, labor, consumers, the Great War). But these variables do not matter similarly to each outcome. To put the matter crudely, social class does not account for visions of the ethical consumer, but it does account, in part, for the results of activists’ conflicts with labor and trade unions. Consequently, a straightforward comparison of these cases, arranged in accordance with the methods of agreement and difference (Skocpol 1984; Ragin 1987), would yield little about the dynamics of their consumer activism over the period from 1880 to 1919. While these activists differed in terms of their social class and gender composition, they converged on a similar understanding of the ethical consumer and set of problems to address over the course of their activism. Despite their similarities, activists’ differences in character, context, and form did shape their activism in crucial ways. What seems to matter in one instance recedes to the background in another. Thus, at the abstract level of comparative design, a case-based comparison of activists’ similarities and differences reveals little about what they did and why.

By treating these shared and recurrent problems as the basis for comparative analysis, I am able to track the paths of activists’ actions across a range of problem-solving situations. In this way, I retain the ability to compare similarities and differences but across a range of action-problems, rather than stable cases with stable phenomena to

be explained. The focus on problem-solving in historical sociology can illuminate when certain variables matter for the dynamics of social action. Biernacki notes that a focus on problem-solving fixes the attention of the researcher on empirical evidence of action, not hypothesized variables of interest (2005:87). If a given variable matters, we can observe it in the way actors define and solve problems across a range of situations. Moreover, comparisons based on problem-solving can address the complications that arise when treating cases both as independent and connected. Haydu focuses on comparisons of cases across a range of time periods as re-iterated problem-solving (2009; 1998). By comparing “recurrent dilemmas faced by social actors”, he argues that historical sociologists can address links between distinct time periods and distinctive causes (Haydu 2009:32-33). Although Haydu proposes this model for cross-temporal comparisons, I show that a focus on problem-solving can yield similar insights within a given time period across distinctive places. Thus, turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists developed analogous commitments to the ethical consumer and strategies for encouraging ethical purchasing. Yet as I trace their actions throughout the period, they displayed varied responses to analogous problems. An approach that places problem-solving front and center allows us to recognize and explain these similarities and differences in fluctuating actions without reducing them to a single formula. Consequently, a problem-based approach to comparative and historical analysis can arrive at robust accounts of the fine-grained, temporal dynamics of action (Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

To appreciate how I construct this problem-based approach to comparison, it is necessary to say a few words about my archival sources. I have drawn on a range of primary sources in the course of this dissertation research, the bulk of which reflect the activities of these three groups. First, I have examined the records of the National Consumers' League. This includes annual reports, meeting minutes, private correspondence, investigative reports, pamphlets, propaganda, photography, and newspaper articles. In addition, I drew upon the publications by League members in journals such as the *American Journal of Sociology* and league pamphlets intended to raise awareness of labor issues. Second, I have consulted a range of co-operative sources—both the Wholesale Society and the Women's Co-operative Guild. These include the annual reports of the Co-operative Wholesale Society (1880-1920), the annual reports of the Women's Co-operative Guild (1884-1930), the Manchester and Salford Equitable Monthly (1900-1920), and the complete records of the Co-operative News from 1880 through 1920. The latter was published weekly. It includes reports from the Co-operative Wholesale Society, Women's Guild, and other co-operative groups. Furthermore, it contained frequent accounts of co-operative conferences and meetings as well as letters to the editor and advertisements. Moreover, I have examined the Co-operative Annuals from 1888-1920. These Annuals provide overviews of co-operative budgets, essays on timely issues, and portraits of co-operative figures. In addition, I examined co-operative pamphlets and publications from the period. These ranged from Co-operative histories to essays on the purposes and structure of the Co-operative Wholesale Society.

In addition to these direct sources, I also consulted one other relevant source for contrast: the records of the Christian Social Union. Unlike the NCL, CWS, and the Women's Guild, the Christian Social Union had branches in both England and the United States. Furthermore, they exemplify the differences between groups that employed consumer-centered strategies and consumer activists. Their records include sermons, meeting minutes, publications, and annual reports, all of which speak to the various projects that this group undertook. The Christian Social Union was based in England primarily, although there were affiliated groups in the United States. This group of Christian social reformers sometimes pursued consumer-oriented campaigns. However, unlike the NCL, CWS, and the Women's Guild, the Christian Social Union did not define themselves as a consumer group. As such, they provide a counterpoint to the thought and work of the consumer activists I emphasize.

While my sources might suggest a simple comparison of each group in isolation, I find a problem-based approach more congenial when seeking to understand the dynamics of consumer activism during this period. The primary justification for such a decision comes from the sources themselves. If these groups did not always converge in the substance of their ideas and approaches, the issues they confronted were strikingly similar. As I will show in detail, they converged around a vision of the ethical consumer as well as their strategies for inducing ethical purchasing. Furthermore, these consumer activists came into direct conflict with similar groups. From trade unions and business owners to their own membership, consumer activists were consistently faced with an analogous issue—resistance to their projects to encourage ethical purchasing. With the

outbreak of the First World War, consumer activists' confronted another similar problem—a massive disruption to their campaigns for ethical purchasing. By suggesting that they experienced similar problems, I do not assume a false equivalence between the natures of the problems. As my research shows, there were very clear differences in the content of these consumer activist projects. But attention to these formal, problem-based similarities can serve as a heuristic device to explain the striking similarities and differences in the course of their activism.

What are the epistemological virtues of using formal, problem-based similarities to structure a comparison of these consumer activist groups? First, a problem-based approach can avoid the trap of assuming, rather than demonstrating, the explanatory significance of group-specific characteristics (Brubaker 2005). If we assume, from the start, that these groups are distinct because they are separate groups with different qualities, we may miss important similarities between them. To take a simple example, the National Consumers' League, the Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Guild had distinctive gender compositions. The NCL and the Women's Guild were women's groups, while the CWS was predominantly men. By assuming that these organizations developed wholly idiosyncratic gender-specific organizational scripts for action, we would miss out on the strikingly similar account of the ethical consumer that these groups offered. At the same time, I can show when gender differences shaped the courses of action that each group took in greater detail. In the course of my investigation, I show how these distinctive group-level qualities came to matter differently with respect to the problems these activists' addressed.

Second, a problem-based approach permits me to study consumer activism in an international and, to some degree, transnational context. To this point, research on consumer activism has occurred primarily within a national framework. By reconsidering turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activism in light of the problems activists' confronted, we stand to reveal how these problems cut across national borders. This is a fact that consumer activists themselves recognized, but one that has been underemphasized in scholarly accounts of consumer activism—especially those that study consumer activism prior to the Second World War. Such studies of consumer politics commonly remain within a national framework (Trentmann 2008; Hilton 2003; Glickman 2008; Trumball 2006). Ultimately, this problem-based approach illuminates the transnational dynamics of action more clearly and precisely than an approach that begins by treating these groups simply as cases to be compared (Abbott 1991).

#### Chapter Summary

To address these dynamics in the work of turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists, my dissertation comprises two interrelated sections. In the first three chapters, I focus on consumer activists' work to define and popularize the ethical consumer. In the second three chapters, I focus on analogous practical problems that consumer activists faced—resistance from business and labor, inconsistent ethical purchasing, and the disruptions of the First World War.

In the first chapter, I describe how these groups converged upon a similar vision of the ethical consumer despite their contrasting origins and surprising degree of independence from one another. The consumer, they claimed, had a (1) responsibility to

use his or her choices wisely. As an organized body, consumers had a (2) special power and duty to remedy social ills like sweatshop labor. Finally, as members of these groups noted, the consumers was (3) a universal figure. These shared concerns mark these groups as consumer activists.

The second chapter shows that these broad similarities extended into activists' approaches to motivating ethical purchasing, which were premised on a sensory model of action. In response to what Marx called commodity fetishism, activists attempted to uncover the hidden realms of production and distribution and trusted that images of these hidden realms would motivate ethical purchasing. According to the activists themselves, if they could expose people to images and sense impressions, figurative and literal, of sweatshop horrors, then people would buy righteous goods from righteous places. In the process, these groups pursued a range of similar sensory "framing" strategies, from staging "lantern lectures" and hosting conferences to branding goods and publishing "white lists"; these activities were intended to allow consumers to see the labor conditions of commodity production. Such strategies, too, expressed a commitment to the ethical power of the senses, where perceptual and mental seeing would lead, inexorably, to ethical purchasing.

In the third chapter, I explore the concerns or motives that induced consumer activists' shared vision of the ethical consumer and their strategies to produce them. I identify three public motives evident in activists' shared scripts and strategies: capitalist methods of production and circulation, Christian reform sentiment, and naturalist psychological assumptions. Despite the many reasons for these groups to diverge, these

concerns induced shared strategies for motivating ethical purchasing and tied these groups together, spiritually, as consumer activists. As an ethical subject, the consumer shouldered a responsibility to the capitalist world that she found herself in and demanded of her through her purchasing.

The fourth chapter deals with the diverse character and outcome of activists' conflicts with labor and business interests. The Co-operative Wholesale Society, trumpeting their class and national identities, remained steadfast in their conflicts with labor and pursued policies that emphasized their fundamental differences from trade unions. In these conflicts the Women's Guild, by contrast, were more likely to emphasize their similarity to trade unions. Both co-operative groups also came into repeated conflicts with business interests and sought to define themselves as good, Free Trade-loving English people in contrast to the businesses that engaged in coercive boycotts of Co-operative products. Finally, the National Consumers' League shifted the course of their activism by abandoning the clothing label that formed the center of their consumer activism after coming into repeated conflicts with labor. I reconstruct these conflicts to show that, in these circumstances, consumer activists pursued courses of action that reflected their unique class, gender, and national situations; this resulted in relations with labor and business interests that varied in accordance with class, gender, and nation.

In the fifth chapter, I focus on conflicts within consumer activist groups: activist groups dealt with the problem of how to get their own members to purchase ethical goods consistently. Because consumer activism of this sort requires people to consistently purchase ethically independently of one another, the problem is not just to raise

awareness, but to secure ethical purchasing after raising awareness. To do this, activists' sought to reshape and discipline consumers' desires. In doing so, these activists call attention to weakness of the will as a collective action problem. Activists' attempts to overcome the weakness of the will brought out key organizational differences between the Co-operatives and the National Consumers' League. In particular, the centrality of the store to co-operative life accentuated two features of co-operation: 1) the strong distinction between members and non-members and 2) the accumulation of information of members' purchasing. These features allowed co-operators to employ disciplinary tactics to reshape members' desires and overcome weakness of the will. By contrast, the National Consumers' League had access to neither of these tactics. Consequently, they focused on educational tactics to overcome consumers' lack of self-control.

In the final chapter, I explore the transformations these groups underwent during the First World War. In England, the Co-operatives retained their consumer-centered strategies and began to take explicit political positions with the formation of the Co-operative Party; in America, the National Consumers' League took a decisive turn away from consumer-centered strategies and turned almost exclusively toward legislative and judicial battles over wage laws. Obviously, the experience of the war as an event differed for the Co-operative groups and the National Consumers; League. But World War I underscored key political and organizational differences between the two groups, which allowed both to transform their activism. The National Consumers' League's decisive turn toward legislative politics occurred in conjunction with labor union conflicts and the federal government's attempt to encourage volunteerism to gather information about

transformations of working conditions during the war. These political opportunities encouraged the group to the Consumers' League to protect vulnerable populations through means other than consumer-oriented campaigns. By contrast, the co-operatives edged into radically anti-Capitalist language and publicly embraced politics when confronted with the extent of war profiteering and rationing, while they maintained their commitment to consumer-centered strategies. Their experience of marginalization in British political life highlighted their basic charge to protect poor and working class consumers. In the unsettled period of the war, their shared vision of the ethical consumer drifted farther apart.

Overall, I show that by attending to consumer activists' ethical engagements with capitalist phenomena and recurring practical dilemmas, we can account for their analogous, yet divergent paths of action. When addressing others via commodities or interpreting capitalist phenomena for themselves, these activists developed similar repertoires of action. I show their concern with the proliferation of mass-produced everyday goods, the separation of production from consumption, and the money economy in particular (chapters one and two). When addressing other people directly, these activists revealed group-specific orientations or purposes—sometimes these were specific to the class, gender, or national characters of these groups (chapter four); other times these were specific to the organizational forms (chapter five). But in the event of the First World War, these activists' were encouraged to reconsider their purposes entirely and responded especially to political opportunities (chapter six). Thus we can explain where consumer activists converged and diverged with reference to activists' ethical

interpretations of the developing capitalist world. Rather than insist on capitalism as an unobservable structure, we can learn to appreciate the ways that it appeared to consumer activists – however partial or limited these perceptions. Moreover, we can see how it became more or less central with varied practical problems that these activists experienced.

### Looking Ahead

The ethical consumer is a distinctively modern figure. Some argue that the very notion of an ethical consumer is paradoxical (Bauman 2008; Szasz 2007; Zizek 2009). To promote ethical consumption undermines the very basis for ethics and political commitment by reducing ethics to consumer choice. Others argue that the ethical consumer is a mythical creature (Devinney, Auger, and Eckhardt 2010) because those who claim to engage in ethical purchasing will rarely do so with any consistency. Still others point out that the ethical consumer is redundant; just like any other action, purchasing occurs in a web of human relations from loved ones and store employees to marketers and distant laborers (Miller 2002; Zelizer 2011). The ethical question is merely one of determining which relations matter in the act of purchasing itself. But whether the ethical consumer is paradoxical, mythical, or redundant, this figure seems inescapable; it speaks to a modern kind of guilt. To what extent must we, in virtue of our consumer habits, desires, and needs, be complicit in practices that we would consider unethical or abhorrent? The reminders of our complicity in distant suffering come to us both in public and in private. Most publicly and horrifying are catastrophic events such as the 2013 factory collapse in Dhaka, Bangladesh. With over 1,100 garment workers dead and 2,000

injured, consumers were forced to confront, if only momentarily, their role in encouraging exploitative labor practices. Yet the news cycle rarely stays with any stories for very long. More insistent are the organizations devoted to keeping the ethical consumer alive. From fair trade organizations to ethical consumer guides, these groups seek to remind us of our complicity in the policies and practices of the businesses that benefit from our purchases. Furthermore, the sheer anonymity of consumer goods encourages us to wonder, if only in private, where they came from and who made them. Turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists made this argument forcefully, perhaps more so than activists before or since. In their struggle to make consumers ethical, they reveal that the abstract structures of social science may appear to us, if we would only look for them.

## Chapter 1 – The Ethical Consumer

The co-operative voyagers came across it [an organic commonwealth] accidentally rather than of intent—as Columbus sailed to the West ‘Indies.’ They landed on the shores of this unexplored continent when they discovered the consumer, and found that everybody is a consumer and that an organization of consumers is an organized whole. – *The Story of the Co-operative Wholesale Society*, Percy Redfern

Recognizing the fact that the majority of employers are virtually helpless to maintain a high standard as to hours, wages, and working conditions under the stress of competition unless sustained by the cooperation of consumers, the National Consumers’ League propose to education public opinion and to endeavor so to direct its force as to promote better [conditions] among the workers, while securing to the consumer exemption from the dangers attending to unwholesome conditions. – Constitution of the National Consumers’ League

In contemporary capitalist societies, everyone is a consumer. This may sound banal to our ears, inundated as we are with injunctions to purchase goods and services for the good of ourselves and of our communities. But to some consumer activists at the turn of the twentieth-century, this betokened a democratic vision and explicit moral injunction. For them, the consumer became a canvas upon which they could project an image of democratic participation in and control of the growing productive and regulatory forces associated with consumer capitalism. The consumer promised a more encompassing, universal social identity upon which to build a more just, more democratic society. This was especially true when contrasted with the narrower identities such as laborer or businessman. For these activists, the consumer held out the promise of an organic commonwealth, as those in consumer co-operatives would have called it—in short, a community of responsible citizens and true fellowship. For its proponents, the democratic potential of the consumer was only preliminary. The consumer needed to

recognize his or her moral obligations to others through the consistent exercise of ethical faculties in action.

To what extent, then, can we say that consumer activists in the National Consumers' League, Co-operative Wholesale Society, and, the Women's Co-operative Guild shared this understanding of the consumer, as a consumer-citizen? In this chapter, I draw on activists own statements to render an account of activists' vision of the ethical consumer. Who did they imagine the consumer to be and what did good or bad consumers do? This account serves three main purposes. First, it provides a comparative referent for subsequent chapters, in which I examine how consumer activists constructed and responded to practical problems such as conflicts with labor and consumer mobilization. This commitment to the ethical consumer suffuses and orients activists' campaigns throughout the period from the late 1880s through 1920. As such, it grounds subsequent comparisons of the strategies and actions that these consumer activists engaged in. Second, this commitment to the ethical consumer establishes the basis for treating these groups as engaged in analogous projects. By demonstrating the significance of three basic principles—the universality and moral responsibility of the consumer—I show that, despite national, organizational, class, and gender differences, the National Consumers' League, the Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative Guild, were invested in analogous projects—organizing consumers for “moral” purposes around a kind of consumer-citizenship. Moreover, in addition to the consumer's universality and moral responsibility, consumers were potentially a powerful agent of social change. Finally, by demonstrating the analogies between these groups, I seek to

depart from an implicit assumption in much historical work on consumption, as well as comparative and historical work in the social sciences: that we can treat the nation-state as an obvious axis along which to compare consumption and many other social practices.

#### The Consumer in the Zeitgeist

In many ways, each of these groups from the National Consumers' League to the Wholesale Co-operatives channel the Zeitgeist of contemporary political economy in focusing on the significance of the consumer and consumption. Furthermore, transformations in the nature and extent of production—underway in the United States and England, although at differing rates—encouraged people to rethink who they were and how they defined themselves (Livingston 1997). The rise of trusts and trade unions, for instance, accentuated the questions of organization and power—who was able to organize and whose interests did these organized parties represent. These issues were directly relevant to the work that these consumer activists pursued. But even capital and labor engaged in consumerist strategies and tactics. Lawrence Glickman has shown how the American labor movement drew upon the notion of a living wage and labeling campaigns to bolster their power and define their identities as laborers (often with profoundly exclusionary consequences for women and non-white workers see Glickman 1997: 133-146). These strategies were subsequently adopted by some trade unions in the UK, who consciously built upon the perceived successes of their American brethren.<sup>1</sup> Marketers in the United States and England catered to the consumer, too, seeking to

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<sup>1</sup> National Union of Boot and Shoe Operators, Monthly Report, January 1908, p.13; although the trade union label or stamp was not put into practice until late 1910 or early 1911.

entice with written advertisements and new ways of presenting goods, such as elaborate department store windows (Leach 1994; McGovern 2006; Rappaport 2000).

However, the consumer groups I discuss shared three distinctive features. First, they sought to organize people to identify and act as a consumer. Second, this consumer had both rights and obligations to him- or her-self and to others, not as a supporter of labor or as a quality-seeking buyer alone (although these were relevant as well). Third, the consumer had the power to remedy social injustices. These activists asked the consumer to act as a figure distinct from the interests and concerns of those pushed by business or labor. In this sense, activists sought to construct a more robust, quasi-autonomous sense of the consumer. While this consumer was thoroughly embedded within a broader community, it referred to a form of social identification not reducible to others such as laborer, merchant, woman, or man. The NCL presented business leaders as “virtually helpless” to eliminate sweatshop labor in the face of competition, thus leaving the task up to “public opinion” and the cooperation of consumers.<sup>2</sup> Co-operators—both wholesale members and affiliated groups like the Co-operative Women’s Guild—also stressed the unity of consumers as an antidote to the threat of competition.<sup>3</sup> I will elaborate on each of these in more detail shortly.

To highlight the distinctiveness of activists’ emphasis, one set of ideas about the consumer deserves explicit mention: contemporary economists.<sup>4</sup> Founding member of the

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<sup>2</sup>“Constitution” in *Second Annual Report of the National Consumers League, 1900-1901*, p. 3. See also, an early ad in *Annual Reports since early 1900s*. National Consumers’ League Archives, Reel 4, Slide 375.

<sup>3</sup>‘Educating the Purchaser’ in *Co-operative News*, 1898, p.802 or ‘The Cost of Cheapness’ in *Co-operative News*, 1905, p. 410, among many others.

<sup>4</sup> I focus on Anglophone economists as these were more commonly cited authorities among these groups throughout the period. As always, Florence Kelley of the National Consumers’ League is an exception,

Consumers' League of New York, Maud Nathan, looked to the writings of English economist John Atkinson Hobson to justify the League's own work. She wrote, "Hobson...had proclaimed that the wealth of a nation could be increased far more rapidly by educating consumers than by increasing the work of producers."<sup>5</sup> But this account of Hobson's work doesn't accord with Hobson's own claims. In *The Evolution of Modern Capitalism*, Hobson did assert that social progress depended on the "improved quality and character of consumption." (1901 [1894]: 368) But Hobson did not understand "educating consumers" in the way that Nathan suggested. Whereas Nathan stressed consumers' responsibilities to unseen laborers, Hobson stressed a "just economy of individuality." (ibid.: 370) By this, Hobson meant that industrial capitalist society would be improved in so far as it developed an appropriate balance between machine and artisanal (or artful) production. The former would satisfy needs that were common to all, while the latter would satisfy individualized needs. In the best case, Hobson suggests that the "cultivation of individual taste...shall graft a fine-art upon each machine-industry[.]" Moreover, it will apportion "to machinery that work which is hard, dull, dangerous, monotonous, and uneducative, while that which is pleasant, worthy, interesting, and educative [will be] reserved for the human agent." (ibid.: 372) In fact, Hobson distanced himself from self-consciously ethical consumer movements. When writing about the Victorian critic John Ruskin, Hobson dismissed attempts to moralize consumers: "Something, doubtless, may be done by 'white lists' and Consumers' Leagues...But this

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interested as she was in the thought of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. See Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 100-105.

<sup>5</sup> Maud Nathan, *The Story of Epoch-Making Movement*, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1926), p. 23; The first president of the National Consumers' League, John Graham Brooks, cited the very same passage in a pamphlet entitled "The Consumers' Leagues." See

‘something’ is infinitesimally little.” (Hobson 1898: 218) Nathan’s misreading of Hobson actually speaks to the distinctiveness of her assessment of the consumer contra Hobson, a self-professed “economic heretic.” (Hobson 1938)

But other turn-of-the-twentieth century economists were keen to acknowledge the significance of consumption such as Thorstein Veblen and Alfred Marshall. While they noted the economic and social significance of consumers, they rarely ascribed special moral or ethical significance to consumer tastes. For instance, in his *Principles of Economics* (first published in 1890), Marshall noted that consumption had been “somewhat neglected” and identified three reasons why consumption was returning to prominence (1961: 84). The third of these reasons suggests the relevance of social and ethical concerns to consumption, but he stops short of advocating the kind of ethical attitude articulated by consumer activists:

the spirit of the age induces a closer attention to the question whether our increasing wealth may not be made to go further than it does in promoting the general wellbeing; and this again compels us to examine how far the exchange value of any element of wealth, whether in collective or individual use, represents accurately the addition which it makes to happiness and wellbeing. (ibid.: 85)

While Marshall clearly recognized the ethical implications of consumption, he characterized the economic problem as a technical one. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), Thorstein Veblen famously described the significance of consumption in terms of a primitive tendency to emulate others. Veblen’s satirical account of consumption as a barbaric vestige may not have been celebratory, but he made a strong case for its significance.

But while Hobson, Marshall, and Veblen dignified consumption as a serious object of study (or in Veblen's case satire), their approaches differed in kind from consumer activists. Activists' affirmed a universal consumer identity and as we will see they saw the consumer as a means of resolving (or beginning to resolve) labor-oriented social problems. Moreover, activists emphasized the ethical duties and responsibilities of consumers. These aspects recommend them as uniquely 'modern' groups, who staked claims, knowingly, to be called and to act as consumers.<sup>6</sup> I begin then with activists' notions of the consumer—who the consumer was, the role he or she played, his or her virtues and vices—espoused by those who sought to mobilize them. What were the special characteristics, duties and, rights that these activists attributed to consumers and how thoroughly was this vision shared across national borders? The extent to which these visions of the ethical consumer shaped consumer activists strategies is a question that can be addressed only after establishing what this vision is. Given that many contemporaries had profound reservations about the value of consumption, these activists devoted ample effort to explaining this vision of the ethical consumer to skeptics. It is to these explanations that I turn first.

#### The National Consumers' League (US)

The *National Consumers' League* and the regional Leagues out of which it developed—New York City, especially—limned the consumer as a member of a broad

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<sup>6</sup>There is a vast literature on consumption, consumers, and modernity. See Mukerji 1983; Brewer, Plumb, and McKendrick 1983; Slater 1997; Agnew 1993; Bauman 2000; Trentmann 2006; among many others. While historians date the origins of a 'consumer society'—one where the purchase, use, and display of goods attainable through markets becomes an important means of surviving and living a meaningful life—to the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the conscious identification as a consumer tends to follow a bit later. The use of the term consumer itself became commonplace only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Williams 1983:79). Consequently, these groups participated in the process of articulating a sense of ourselves as consumers.

community and, consequently, as responsible for the harms perpetrated upon those who produced, distributed, and sold goods. The League's constitution included the following broad statement:

That the interests of the community demand that all workers shall receive fair living wages, and that goods shall be produced under sanitary conditions:

SEC. 2. That the responsibility for some of the worst evils from which producers suffer rests with the consumers who seek the cheapest markets regardless how cheapness is brought about:

SEC. 3. That it is, therefore, the duty of consumers to find out under what conditions the articles they purchase are produced and distributed, and insist that these conditions shall be wholesome and consistent with a respectable existence on the part of the workers.<sup>7</sup>

As a statement of purpose, these principles identify a broad communal interest and allocate a specific role to consumers, that is, to uplift the conditions of laborers. But while this would be significant in itself, the NCL grounded this moral claim in a specific interpretation of who the consumer was.

The consumer was, first and foremost, an emissary of the public; he or she was in fact the public. In 1915, Florence Kelley, the secretary and leader of the National Consumers' League, characterized her work as relating to the "public as consumers." An early piece of NCL propaganda asked prospective members the following question: "Will you help to form an intelligent public opinion as to the responsibilities of consumers?"<sup>8</sup> This rhetorical gesture rendered the consumer as a potentially universal figure, within the limits of societies whose provisioning occurred by means of industrial mass production.

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<sup>7</sup>"Constitution" in *Second Annual Report 1900*, p.3.

<sup>8</sup>*Annual Reports since early 1900s*. National Consumers' League Archives, Reel 4, Slide 375; Letter to Myrta, 09/18/1915 Reel 27, Slide 147

As a potentially universal figure, the consuming public possessed immense unrealized political potential when compared to other groups such as capital and labor. In an argument with Samuel Gompers over closed shops, then NCL president and former Secretary of War, Newton D. Baker wrote, “over these two groups [labor and capital] and including them both stands the great public, which has specialized itself into all sorts of activities to carry on the business, preserve the health, promote the education and recreation, and minister to the higher aesthetic and artistic needs of a modern society.”<sup>9</sup> Although the group remained clearly sympathetic to the interests of Labor and laborers, the league maintained a formal position of neutrality that reinforced an image of consumer universality, especially when compared with other groups. When a petticoat manufacturer complained to the Consumers’ League of Massachusetts about the league’s identification with trades unions, they wrote him a letter explaining their “entirely neutral position.”<sup>10</sup> Whatever the practical ambiguities of the relationship between labor and the NCL, and there were many, their ideological position remained one of tenuous neutrality, which reinforced the image of the consumer as a figure that transcended the interests of organized labor or business.

But the NCL did not always insist on the consumers’ purported neutrality to justify their role. In their constitution, they indicated the necessity of joint consumer action: “Recognizing the fact that the majority of employers are virtually helpless to maintain a high standard’ as to hours, wages, and working conditions under the stress of

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<sup>9</sup>Letter to Samuel Gompers. 1919. Reel 23, Slide 735.

<sup>10</sup>Massachusetts CL Meeting, 01/08/1908, Reel 16, Slide 114.

competition unless sustained by the co-operation of consumers.”<sup>11</sup> The consuming public stood as the only consistent means of enforcing co-operation between employers and workers. One NCL ad listed off a collection of “Don’t’s for Shoppers.” The ad discouraged shopping late in the evening or close to Christmas, as well as asking for orders to be delivered late in the evening. Furthermore, it admonished consumers who neglected to purchase league-labeled underwear, among other things.<sup>12</sup> These “Don’ts” appealed to a consumer who sought convenience for him- or her-self, above all, and one who sought cheapness regardless of how it was brought about. At the same time, they revealed the NCL’s commitment to the consumer as a potentially powerful agent of social change.

Ultimately, then, the NCL envisioned the consumer as a more plausible universal figure than other social identities such as laborer or entrepreneur. Moreover, the consumer needed to recognize his or her duties to others, especially to laborers. The duties issued from the moral position of the consumer, as well as his or her social position. In a moral sense, the consumer benefited and depended upon others to supply the goods he or she bought; the interdependence of consumer and laborer, in particular, secured this obligation. In a practical sense, the consumer stood between the two great partisan interests of the period—capital and labor. Consequently, the figure of the ethical consumer resolved the intractable conflict between businessmen and workers, a particularism born of both group interest and market conditions. The ethical consumer was universal, responsible, and socially powerful.

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<sup>11</sup> “Constitution” in *Second Annual Report 1900*, p.3

<sup>12</sup> “Don’t’s for Shoppers”, Reel 4, Slide 375.

### Co-operative Wholesale Society (UK)

The National Consumers' League was not alone in identifying the consumer as an actor with specific ethical obligations and universal potential. As Percy Redfern (1913) suggested in his history of the co-operative movement quoted above, the early Rochdale Pioneers "discovered the consumer" as a means of organizing entire societies. However, it turns out that Redfern's description betrays a distinctive, contemporary gloss. While the original Rochdale Pioneers pooled their resources and created a store through which they and other workers could purchase staple foods and other goods, they described it differently. As an actor, the consumer was not quite the central ideological figure that he was to become by the time that Percy Redfern published his first history of the CWS in 1913.<sup>13</sup> This change indicates a gradual proliferation of the term consumer in England, which paralleled the development of corporate capitalism in the United States (Livingston 1997; Sklar 1989). But by the 1890s, the *Co-operative News*, one of the central ideological voices of the co-operative movement began to use the term 'consumer' to indicate actual and potential members of co-operative societies.<sup>14</sup>

When Redfern wrote of the co-operative voyagers who discovered the consumer, he referred to the consumer in two related senses. The consumer signified both the actual person who shopped at co-operative stores and the abstract entity around which entire societies could be organized. When discussing practical consumers, members of co-

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<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, "First Plans for CWS" in Redfern's *The Story of the C.W.S.* pp. 405-413. This plan focuses on wholesale purchasing and establishing stores. It makes no claims for the consumers or buyers, as such, even though the consumer is, as Redfern's point suggests, largely implicit.

<sup>14</sup>For instance, "Sweating and Some Remedies" in *Co-operative News* 10/05/1889, p. 1089; "Worker, Consumer, and Capitalist" in *Co-operative News*, 03/08/1890, "The Duty of the Store to the Wholesale" in *Co-operative News*, 07/04/1891, p. 678.

operative societies and others were likely to use the term ‘customer’ or ‘buyer’, which invoked a whole range of practical issues that co-operative shopkeepers addressed day in and day out. In an article on the employment of women in shops, the editors wrote, “for the sake of the customers who are profoundly anxious not to assist either knowingly or otherwise at oppressions of workers, we wish somebody would undertake to make known the shops in all big towns where buyers can go with a clear conscience.”<sup>15</sup> Whereas contemporary consumer activism often celebrates the individual consumer for choosing well, this attitude suggests profound and ongoing anxiety about being implicated in unjust practices.<sup>16</sup> The “customer” and “buyer” had specific interests in knowing the conditions of employment for female shop assistants—we need not concern ourselves right now with the extent to which these are common interests—that someone could satisfy. The term ‘consumer’ covered both this concrete figure and a more abstract figure whose purchasing power the co-operative societies sought to organize. Redfern’s statement that “everyone is a consumer” may seem like a toothless or banal generality. But co-operative members drew upon such sentiments to suggest that the consumer could serve as an ideal and democratic basis around which to organize production, industry, and business.<sup>17</sup> People’s common identity as consumers would be the most fundamental basis for a more just social order—contra individual’s shared identities as laborers or employers, for instance. This brand of consumer democracy suggested the consumer as

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<sup>15</sup> “Employment of Women in Shops” in *Co-operative News*, 09/08/1884, p. 1030

<sup>16</sup> As one co-operator wrote, “We want an assurance that the clothes we wear and the foods we eat are made under proper conditions.” “The Taint of the Sweater”, *Co-operative News*, 05/26/1906, p. 584

<sup>17</sup> “Consumers’ v. Producers’ Co-operation”, Ed. In *Co-operative News*, 12/04/1920; “Problems for Co-operations: How Consumers are Becoming Slaves of Private Producers”, Special Commissioner’s Report, in *Co-operative News*, 09/23/1911, p. 1216.

an untapped source for realizing popular sovereignty, hence Redfern's emphasis on the Pioneers' 'discovery' of the consumer.

As both a universal economic actor *and* concrete purchasers, the consumer had ethical responsibilities. The challenge for co-operative societies was to encourage people to realize their shared identities as consumers and to shape their specific desires and preferences to match their ideal image of the consumer as ethical actor. What was this ideal image? The consumer had certain rights and duties, incumbent upon him to exercise and follow. He must, first of all, use his consumer decisions wisely, in the service of both thrift and justice. Wanton spending on the wrong kinds of goods, whether of inferior quality or of dubious provenance expressed a failure to understand one's community and social obligations.<sup>18</sup> As a companion to such level-headed and wise consumption, the consumer deserved the right to be free from the exploitation of the shopkeeper or other middle-men. The deceitful tactics of shop-keepers took advantage of the "poor consumer" who depended upon such shop-keepers for staple goods like butter, bread, milk, and others.<sup>19</sup> Finally, the consumer needed to recognize his duty to those around him, from the workers who produced his goods to the co-operative stores to which he may have belonged. In recognizing his duty to others, the consumer would contribute to the reorganization of society around the principles of co-operation rather than competition.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>"The Store Discipline." Ed. *Co-operative News*. 03/12/1898, p. 278.

<sup>19</sup> "The Middleman Ethically Considered", Ed. *Co-operative News*. 01/16/1897, p. 61; "The Poor Consumer," *Co-operative News*. 11/17/1906, p. 354.

<sup>20</sup> "Co-operation and Culture", J.S. Appleby. *Co-operative News*. 02/09/1907, p. 149; "What is Co-operation?" in Manchester and Salford Equitable Herald, August 1901, Vol. XIII, No. 153. p. 134.

Taken together, these three characteristics—the abstract economic actor, concrete purchaser, and ethical actor—point to the consumer as a fundamental figure with immense social power. As we will see, co-operators struggled with this principle, in particular, when it came to conflicts with laborers, whom they counted as their primary constituency. But as an abstract principle, the consumer provided a fundament upon which co-operators could rest their appeals to workers, businessmen, and others whom they sought to enlist and argue with. The consumer could not simply demand what he himself wanted, but must learn to recognize and use his purchasing power responsibly so as to remedy the inequalities and disorders of contemporary social life.<sup>21</sup>

Sometimes co-operators' qualified their commitment to the ethical consumer in light of their working-class identity. The Co-operative Wholesale Society and other organs of the consumer co-operative movement drew members from the relatively stable segments of the working classes, to the eternal frustration of some co-operators. But despite these qualifications, they ultimately cast their lot with the consumer as an agent of change. Sometimes, co-operators wrote about the consumer as an abstractly universal figure and a concrete worker. Take, for instance, a Report in a 1911 edition of the *Co-operative News* concerned with the exploitation of consumers at the hands of private producers. The commissioner [otherwise unidentified] writes, "No doubt, as a result of labour upheavals, the profits of these men [private producers] will be increased, whilst the workmen's gains will be snatched from him in increased prices of food, clothing,

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<sup>21</sup> "The Cost of Cheapness," Ed. *Co-operative News*. 04/08/1905, p. 410.

coal, and shelter...The consumer pays the piper.”<sup>22</sup> Here “workmen” and “consumer” appear in analogous positions, suffering increased costs owing to labor unrest. Though the striking workers might win some small gains in wages or benefits, the author cautioned against corresponding cost of living increases. While he clearly refers to working men as those who would bear the brunt of such increases, there is nothing to exclude other non-working class consumers from also being affected. Furthermore, the piece concludes with an affirmation of consumer universality, responsibility, and power: “But is it right that small groups of men should be permitted to enrich themselves by taking advantage of social and industrial changes? Of course, that is the consumers’ own lookout. He has the remedy in his own hands by means of co-operation.”<sup>23</sup> The author contrasts “small groups” of profiteers with the consumer. In the process, he suggests that consumers’ were responsible for righting these wrongs. Just as importantly, he also indicates that co-operation provides the means for securing and representing consumer power. Despite the qualifications, co-operators described a consumer who was a representative of the people (universal), responsible, and socially powerful.

Ultimately, the consumer occupied a special place in the ethical imagination of the CWS, as a figure who had a duty to act justly in relation to his fellow man. Upon realizing this duty, furthermore, the consumer stood to redress his own selfish individualism, which contributed to the consumer’s exploitation at the hands of shopkeepers and middlemen. By convincing consumers of their purchasing power and their duties to others, they stood to eradicate unsavory business practices and

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<sup>22</sup> “Problems for Co-operators. How Consumers are Becoming Slaves of Private Producers.” *Co-operative News*. 09/23/1911, p. 1216

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, p. 1216

undemocratic accumulation of wealth. This pointed to the consumer as an interdependent, potentially universal figure, whose very interdependence and universality secured to him obligations toward others and the power to act on those obligations.

#### Women's Co-operative Guild (UK)

While the CWS, especially through the First World War, used the generic masculine pronoun to identify consumers, many within the movement were aware that most of the actual shopping at Co-operative stores was undertaken by women.<sup>24</sup> As an associated, yet independent co-operative organization, the Women's Co-operative Guild's image of the consumer shared the same ethical thrust as the CWS. They stressed the duties of consumers and decried the thoughtless search for cheapness as a "false economy" which reproduced profit-seeking, sweatshop labor, and other social problems. Yet, they deserve their own discussion because of the extent to which they re-imagined the consumer as a woman, thereby making the claim that social progress depended upon the "woman with the basket." Although the Women's Guild insisted on the gendered nature of the consumer in practice, their vision of the ethical consumer accords with that of the Co-operative Wholesale Society and the National Consumers' League.

From their formation in 1883, the Women's Co-operative Guild sought to reform the co-operative societies with which they were associated as well as the society in which they lived. From the outset, the founders of the Women's Guild voiced concerns about the limitations of consumption that have plagued consumer activist of many stripes: "We

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<sup>24</sup> E.g. Percy Redfern, "The Store Movement and the Wholesale Society", Committee of Enquiry into Control of Industry, Barrow House Conference, 1913; "All Women Should Vote" in *Bolton Co-operative Record*. March 1908.

can be independent members of our store, but we are only asked to come and ‘buy.’”<sup>25</sup> Their hostility to women’s roles as purchasers reflects the gendered nature of Co-operative politics. At the same time, it anticipated concerns that arose with each of these groups: how to use the politics of purchasing as a means of encouraging more robust community involvement. As the Women’s Guild grew, they promoted the spread of co-operation and encouraged women to take an interest in the principles of co-operation. This included campaigns to educate younger generations about co-operation, and to improve the condition of women in the United Kingdom.<sup>26</sup> The Women’s Guild embedded their concerns about the role of women as consumers, as well as consumers more generally, within this framework of improving women’s condition. Consequently, the Women’s Guild adopted a complicated attitude toward consumption and consumers: they wanted women to be recognized as more than mere consumers or purchasers, yet they also sought to build on many women’s practical role as consumers.<sup>27</sup>

The Women’s Corner, one outlet for the Women’s Co-operative Guild members, published articles throughout the 1890s through the First World War. In practice, many of these articles dealt with issues that women, as consumers, would face. From the vagaries of fashion to the virtues of thrift, the Women’s Corner provided advice and counsel for women for navigating the world of shopping. In general, the advice squared with that suggested by the co-operatives: as a consumer one had a duty to make wise and thrifty decisions that promoted co-operation between people as opposed to self-interested

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<sup>25</sup> “The Women’s Corner”, *Co-operative News*, 01/06/1883

<sup>26</sup> “Objects of the Women’s Co-operative League”. Women’s Corner in *Co-operative News*, 05/12/1883, p.396

<sup>27</sup> *The Woman with the Basket: The History of the Women’s Co-operative Guild* by Catherine Webb, p. 18.

individualism. The themes ranged from grocery shopping and appropriate dress to supporting co-operative stores and sweated goods.<sup>28</sup> All of them provided guidelines as to the consumer's responsibilities, often responsibilities that implicitly and explicitly fell upon women.

Although the Guild made much of women's practical roles as consumers, members commonly affirmed the notion that consumers were universal in principle. In a paper intended for "Junior co-operators," Guild member Geraldine Hodgson made the universality of the consumer explicit, "The fact is, from the street arab to the Queen, every one of us is a *consumer*."<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Guild members committed themselves to the notion that co-operation was ultimately a consumers' movement. In a Guild pamphlet introducing Co-operation, M.C. Spooner cited Beatrice Webb's description of co-operation approvingly: "[t]he unit of the co-operative movement is the *customer*—almost invariably a woman."<sup>30</sup> Moreover, when members of the League discussed the consumer's duties, it is clear that these duties obtain for *any* purchaser, even if women were in fact the primary purchasers. In one explicit account of consumer duty, Margaret Llewellyn Davies wrote, "Now the first duty of consumers is that they take care to consume nothing which is not in some way beneficial to the producers and sellers thereof as to the consumers themselves."<sup>31</sup> This generic language of the consumer and the

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<sup>28</sup> "Our Duties as Consumers", Ed. Women's Corner in *Co-operative News*, 01/20/1912 ; "Shopping and How to Do It", *Co-operative News*, 04/09/1892; "The Art of Dress", Annie M. Bacon, *Co-operative News 1894*, p. 1130; "Educating the Purchaser", *Co-operative News 1898*, p. 802; "How to Do the Impossible", *Co-operative News*, 03/07/1903, p 274

<sup>29</sup> "Papers on the Growth and Acquisition of Wealth: Paper V. – The Consumer", Geraldine Hodgson, *The Co-operative News*, 01/11/1890, p. 44

<sup>30</sup> "The Co-operative Store: Paper I. Committees, Members, & Employees." M.C. Spooner. n.d. *Women's Co-operative Guild*. p. 3 [italics in original]

<sup>31</sup> "Our Duties as Consumers", *Co-operative News*, 01/20/1912, p.78

purchaser acknowledged that consumers' duties arose from the nature and role of the consumer. And in principle both men and women could occupy this role, even though men were less likely to confront these issues as consumers since women did the shopping.

The Guild's clearest allusion to consumer power came in the image of the "woman with the basket." Introduced in the first decade of the twentieth century, this image—a woman with woven basket resting upon her knee, looking out into the dawn over an urban landscape—accompanied a manifesto that identified the women's power of purchase as "the greatest earthly power." The introductory paragraph is a paean to consumer power:

The 'Woman with the Basket' is one of the great Types of Humanity. She has place beside the Sower, the Master Builder. She is the ingatherer of the produce of the Earth; the inbringer of the provisions of the Household; the distributor of all succour and help. She is mistress of the markets of the world, for what she will not buy, men need not make nor procure.<sup>32</sup>

With this great power, of course, came great responsibilities:

If we women would cease to buy what is not bread, and begin to search out all that is honest and of good report—if we would but cease to admire and imitate some whom we should rather regard as awful warnings, and learn to honour instead the home-maker and the fellow-worker—if we would cease sinking into apathetic indifference, and bend our energies to make the world better worth living in, we should speedily have a new, happier, and fast-developing social state.<sup>33</sup>

This image emblazoned Guild membership cards and became a way for active members to rally women to the cause. It also underscored the Guild's commitment to a vision of consumer power and responsibility.

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<sup>32</sup> "The Woman with the Basket" in *Co-operative News*, 01/02/1909, p. 22.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 23.

Whereas the CWS offered an abstract and particular image of the universal male consumer, the WCG proceeded from many women's practical roles to a universal female consumer—both with the responsibility to wield their powers so as to usher in a better, more just world. There were clear and present gender differences within the co-operative movement.<sup>34</sup> And the Women's Guild raised the question of who did the actual purchasing rather pointedly. But they also articulated a vision of consumers' transformative social role that shared basic principles with the Wholesale Societies and Consumers' Leagues. The consumer was universal—everyone was at some point or had the capacity to be a consumer, even if women were more commonly consumers in practice. The consumer had responsibilities to the producers of their goods. And the consumer was an untapped agent of social change. In a more common parlance, the Wholesale Societies, Women's Guilds, and Consumers' Leagues understood consumers as citizens with attendant obligations to their fellow men and women.

#### Christian Social Union (UK and US)

While trade unions, Free Trade advocates, and Christian social reformers employed consumer-oriented strategies and tactics, they rarely articulated their visions of the ethical consumer. Trade unions tended to emphasize purchasing politics as a supplement to labor politics, thereby de-emphasizing the role of the consumer. In England, Free Trade advocates were explicit about their imperial project, which

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<sup>34</sup> Barbara Blaszak offers a comprehensive discussion of the gendered politics of co-operation. In particular, she notes that male co-operators advocated an "active" brand of consumption that flattered their image of masculinity. While it would be foolish to ignore the gendered character of consumption in the co-operative movement, Blaszak also underestimates the extent to which male and female co-operators converged on a vision of the consumer in principle. See Blaszak 2000: 1-24

diminished the universality of the consumer.<sup>35</sup> Christian Social reformers made the status of one's soul central to their work, which de-centered the significance of the consumer as such.<sup>36</sup> To highlight the distinctiveness of the ethical consumer as articulated by the NCL, CWS, and the Women's Guild, I offer a brief comparison with their contemporaries in the Christian Social Union. Like the others, the CSU was committed to social reform and even articulated a vision of the ethical consumer as universal and responsible. But rather than insist on consumers' social power, the CSU identified ethical purchasing as relevant to the status of one's soul. Whereas consumer activists' vision stressed the unique social responsibilities of the consumer, the Christian Social Union rendered these responsibilities in slightly different terms—as an individually moral act. Furthermore, the CSU often discussed the consumer in producerist terms—that is, they emphasized the logical and practical priority of production to consumption. Their religious focus mandated that social practice submit to the law of Christian authority, especially the commercial and economic life, to which they devoted extensive thought and work. Consequently, the consumer occupied a less-central conceptual role than in the prior groups.

The CSU was founded in 1889 after four lectures on 'Economic Morals' by Reverend Wilfrid Richmond at Sion College in London.<sup>37</sup> The centrality of economic concerns to the CSU is evident in their constitution, which states their objects as follows: "to study in common how to apply the moral truths and principles of Christianity to the

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<sup>35</sup> The culture of Free Trade was especially strong in England. On Free Trade and consumers at the turn of the twentieth century, see Trentmann (2009).

<sup>36</sup> See, for instance, Gusfield (1986), Vincent (2006), and Curtis (1991).

<sup>37</sup> First Annual Report, 1895.

social and economic difficulties of the present time.”<sup>38</sup> This placed the role of the consumer within a broader moral and social framework than co-operators or consumers’ leagues. After all, the sphere of “commercial life” includes many practices not covered by one’s understanding of the consumer. The Bristol Branch of the CSU described their charge in the following terms:

- (1) that the principles of Christianity are applicable to the facts of modern life and therefore to commerce and industry
- (2) That the view that man is purely ‘economic’ in character or governed by purely ‘natural’ laws, is therefore rejected.
- (3) That commercial morality embraces (a) Trust in the fatherhood of God, (b) brotherhood in Christ, and (c) Co-operation as a principle of action.<sup>39</sup>

The significance of such principles extends to business dealings and, obviously, any human relationships.

Yet despite the breadth of their charge, the CSU singled out consumer decisions as profoundly moral acts and an important part of local CSU activity. Leaders of the CSU issued the following statement, which encouraged local groups to engage in “Preferential Dealing”:

practical experience already gained shows how much can be done even by a small group of people who are really in earnest about their Christianity, who have been at some pains to see how their principles are meant to apply to the conditions of industry and commerce, and who are prepared, if necessary, to make some personal sacrifice in order to be true and just in all their economic dealings.<sup>40</sup>

Preferential Dealing involved investigation of local conditions in a given trade—for instance, tailoring—and subsequent publication of lists containing firms who met certain standards, often defined by trade unions. Here the CSU emphasized the extent to which

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<sup>38</sup> “Constitution”, 11/28/1905

<sup>39</sup> CSU Annual Report, 1905, p. 10. Box 5.

<sup>40</sup> CSU Annual Report, 1903, p. 12. Box 5.

the ‘practical experience’ of ethical buying had the benefit of making the abstract principles of Christian morality in mundane, worldly economic activity.

The CSU, then, extolled the practical virtues of the consumer, as an opportunity to experience the seemingly abstract principles of Christian morality in worldly settings. But the consumer did not promise control over economic life in a given society. Rather than identify the consumer as a solution to a social problem such as sweating, the CSU wrote, “The main remedy for the evils of sweating...is the establishment of wage boards on the lines of the Sweated Industries Bill.”<sup>41</sup> Their attitude toward the problem of sweating indicates their suspicion of the consumer as a source of social change.

In many instances members of the CSU identified ethical purchasing as an individual, economic act as contrasted with collective action as citizens. The members of the London CSU branch described their unwillingness to offer a list for preferential dealing in a 1910 circular: “When a certain article manufactured under certain conditions—such as, for example, china and earthenware finished with leadless glaze...—is desired, preferential dealing is possible. But if it is not a question of manufacture, but of the place where goods are sold...[t]he case is no longer one for the consumer but the citizen.”<sup>42</sup> They had in mind, for instance, advocating particular types of legislation and state-based oversight of suspect professions, workplaces, and commodity chains.

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<sup>41</sup>CSU Annual Report, 1908, p. 4. Box 5. Minimum Wage Boards refer to locally-constituted groups of businessmen and laborers, usually industry-specific, who were tasked with setting minimum wage standards for laborers, while the Sweated Industries Bill specified certain industries that would come under state inspection and enforcement of wages determined by wage boards.

<sup>42</sup> London Branch, Annual Report 1911, p. 8. Box 4.

Ultimately, the CSU distinguished between consumer and citizen, between the ethical obligations that people had as purchasers and as members of a society. This does not mean, however, that they de-emphasized the ethical and moral significance of consumption. Quite the contrary, the consumer should have been concerned with his or her responsibility for the suffering and sin entailed by sweatshop labor or unsafe working conditions. Although earthenware and china did constitute one field in which they saw consumer action as strategically and morally valuable, even there this emphasis on the personal moral significance of ultimately shone through. After having described the role of the public in alleviating plumbism (lead poisoning) in the pottery trade, Constance Smith equivocated, “But certain foreign countries, we are told, refuse to purchase any ware not glazed with lead? Very good. Let the people of those countries settle the matter with their consciences, But let us at home, at least, deliver our souls.”<sup>43</sup>

#### National Consumers? Comparison, Consumption, and Culture

Across diverse contexts, the National Consumers’ League, the Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women’s Co-operative Guild articulated analogous visions of the ethical consumer. This vision of the consumer was universal, responsible to distant others, and powerful enough to remedy social injustices. This analogy raises questions about a common assumption that structures comparative and historical social science as histories of consumers and consumption: that the nation-state is a self-evident axis of cultural variation. In much of this work, researchers often treat culture as defined by national borders (DeSoucey 2010; Fairbrother 2014; Fourcade 2011; Lamont and

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<sup>43</sup>“The Present Facts with Regard to Lead-Poisoning” by Constance Smith, CSU Pamphlet. 11/1909.

Thevenot 2000). Similarly, by comparing nation-states classic works in comparative and historical sociology have treated cultural variation as bound up with the nation-state (Bendix 1966; Moore 1966; Skocpol 1979; Tilly 1995; Biernacki 1995).

To be sure, these works vary in the extent to which they treat the nation-state/culture relationship as either a cause or an effect of different practices. For instance, Moore asks about regimes of governance which, in the modern world, tend to be organized through the nation-state. While Moore criticizes cultural explanations of these regimes of governance, he accepts as a matter of course the notion that distinctive “historical experience” and “forms of society” result in distinctive cultures (Moore 1966: 485). When contrasting the perception of economic opportunity of a typical member of the “Chinese gentry” with an American businessman farmer, he attributes the difference to Chinese Imperial Society. He notes that such differences would arise “because he [the member of Chinese gentry] grew up in Chinese Imperial society whose class structure, system of rewards, privileges and sanctions, penalized certain forms of economic gain that would have destroyed the hegemony and authority of the dominant groups.” (ibid: 486-487) Although Moore reduces “culture” to the conjunctural outcome of various economic variables, he suggests that national and social contexts overlap. In comparative and historical work that takes culture more seriously, the nation-state can still appear as a self-evident boundary for the work of culture. In Richard Biernacki’s *The Fabrication of Labor*, he does not assume that practical conceptions of labor always depend upon the nation-state as such, yet he makes the case that these practices index nationally-consistent patterns (1995: 41-93). For instance, Biernacki concludes with the claim, “It is the

submission of this book that in the contrasting transitions to capitalist labor markets in Germany and Britain, a different understanding of the transmission of labor as a commodity emerged in each country, where it was shared by both its common people and its economic elites[.]” (472) Although the mode of explanation differs, culture and nation similarly merge into something resembling national culture.

My point is not that Moore, Biernacki, and others were wrong to identify these patterns. Rather, the issue is that the comparative foundation upon which these works build points to the nation-state. As such, this comparative framework often lends their discussions of culture the whiff of national determinism. This occurs metonymically, as it were, regardless of the particular explanations that any of the analysts offer. By placing nation-state and culture next to one another often enough, they gain an indelible association. The nation-state acquires an individuality and validity as a category of cultural analysis—we compare national differences and show how factors within nations work to produce these observable national differences. In short, when we compare, we tend to compare nations as basic units of analysis. This produces accounts of culture that are national by definition.

This de facto emphasis on national culture extends to historical accounts of consumption. On the one hand, many histories of consumption and consumer practices focus on or in specific nations (Cohen 2003; Hilton 2003; Hunter and Yates 2011; Strasser, McGovern, and Judt 1998; Trentmann 2009). Some such as Frank Trentmann’s *Free Trade Nation* and T.H Breen’s *The Marketplace of Revolution* propose distinctive national cultures of consumption. Trentmann argues that turn-of-the-twentieth-century

consumer politics—bound up with the Free Trade movement—contributed to the growth of a democratic culture in England. Breen suggests that American colonists' struggle for independence coalesced around their shared experience as consumers (2003). Lawrence Glickman has identified an amnesiac tendency among American consumer activists, wherein they consistently rediscover consumption as a tool in political struggle (2009). Works in this vein demonstrate how consumption shapes and takes on distinctive national characters. On the other hand, comparative histories often stress the contrasting national and transnational cultures of consumption. Victoria de Grazia's *Irresistible Empire* provides an account of American empire through the lens of a globalizing consumer culture. Her account depends on the basic contrast between American consumer culture and European bourgeois lifestyles throughout the middle third of the twentieth century, especially (de Grazia 2005). Patricia Maclachlan identifies cultural differences in American, British, and Japanese responses to genetically-modified foods. While Americans value choice and low prices, Japanese value purity and cleanliness. By contrast, the British cultural concerns about food reflect their peculiar history as a free trade nation (Maclachlan 2006). Thus, historical discussions of consumer cultures tend to stress distinctive national cultures of consumption, whether by default or for the purposes of argument. Even thoroughly transnational histories such as diGrazia's rely on basic distinctions between American and "European" consumer cultures. Again, my point is not to question the empirical truth of these claims. Rather I want to suggest that they can blind us to crucial cultural similarities that transcend national borders.

Despite the empirical evidence for such differences, if one assumes cross-national differences as a matter of course, then one would miss crucial cultural similarities such as English and American activists' commitments to the ethical consumer. In fact, historians of consumer politics commonly stress the national differences between England and the United States (Hilton 2003: 51; Trentmann 2008: 17).<sup>44</sup> The curious history of Consumers' Leagues in the United States and England exemplifies this narrative of national difference. In 1887, the first Consumers' Leagues were established in London by a member of the Women's Trade Union Association named Clementina Black.<sup>45</sup> These Leagues sought to secure fair wages and workplaces by mobilizing consumers to patronize approved shops. The League held meetings over several years before they disbanded in or around 1892. Consumers' Leagues in England never recovered and Black continued to support the trade union movement in other ways. Across the sea, in 1889, a group of American women formed a group called the Working Women's Society. They desired to "investigat[e] and redress the hardships and abuses endured by women and children in shops and factories."<sup>46</sup> In one of their meetings, the Working Women's Society resolved to draw up a list of approved shops where workers received adequate wages and labored under fair conditions. Upon learning of the London-based Consumers' Leagues, the members took on their name and eventually organized the Consumers' League of New York City. Within seven years, the Consumers' Leagues became a nationally-federated organization and inspired similar projects throughout Europe. Thus,

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<sup>44</sup> Many British historians assume that the idiosyncratic strength of Free Trade in the British Empire is sufficient to draw clear distinctions between the two. American historians tend to ignore England entirely. On Free Trade, see Grampp (1987) and Howe (1997).

<sup>45</sup> In the following, I draw on Hilton (2003: 47-49) and Nathan (1926: 15-32).

<sup>46</sup> "The Working Women's Society", *The New York Times*, November 10, 1889.

while the Consumers' Leagues originated in England, they failed to take root there. In America, the Consumers' Leagues found their footing and influenced the work of European reformers. This series of events reinforces the narrative of cross-national difference.

Moreover, some historians reject any suggestion that co-operatives and Consumers' Leagues share a commitment to the ethical consumer without sufficient investigation. Matthew Hilton draws a clear distinction between the Co-operative Movement and the work of Consumers' Leagues. He writes of a "much more divergent body of consumerist thought" in turn-of-the-twentieth-century England in contrast with the sharper focus on consumer citizenship in America (Hilton 2003: 51). In so doing, Hilton distinguishes between Co-operative, Free Trade liberalism, and groups such as the Consumers' Leagues. The latter were seen as a "support to existing labour concerns" and therefore less radical as a consumer movement (ibid.: 47, 51). Similarly, Julien Vincent insists that Consumers' Leagues "should not be confused with workers' consumer co-operatives." (2006: 38) While it would be a mistake to conflate the National Consumers' League, the Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative Guild entirely, English and American peculiarities make it easy to overlook significant similarities in their visions of the ethical consumer. Vincent identifies the same problem when discussing the power of Free Trade in England: "while there is little doubt as to the dominance of the language of free trade, its consequences for the history of consumption in Britain cannot be determined without a careful examination of the discourses and realities of the practices of consumption." (ibid.) Ironically, in light of their analogous

visions of the ethical consumer, this same problem obtains when we draw too sharp a contrast between the Co-operatives and Consumers' Leagues.

Thus, the shared commitment of American and British activists to the ethical consumer unsettles conventional wisdom in comparative social science and histories of consumption. Such a finding does not diminish the significance of national differences, but it does suggest that researchers can rely on cross-national difference as a tool for discovering surprising similarities. This adds heft to the increasingly common claims that scholars need to look beyond and across national borders (Cross 2012: 46). Because the National Consumers' League, Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative Guild articulated analogous visions of the ethical consumer, I can focus on when these cross-national differences matter. The upshot is that cross-national differences can serve *both* to discover crucial similarities and to justify or explain differences, so long as one can specify how these cross-national differences come to matter.

If we rely too hastily upon analytical and explanatory frameworks defined by nation-states, regardless of the kinds of practices and patterns we seek to explain, we risk making a circular and mundane claim: national differences produce national difference. Furthermore, we discourage investigation into more concrete or "local" factors that enter into or shape how relevant actors perceived situations, which might otherwise be aggregated into national factors. For instance, consumer activists, worked under the assumption that showing the public images of sweatshops would lead people to reconsider their purchasing habits. That assumption, coupled with precise concerns that

varied with organizational structure and the dynamics between consumer groups and others, led to different actions. For this reason, then, I do not compare nation-states, but rather self-identified groups with visions of the ethical consumer and approaches to consumer activism.

#### Visions of the Ethical Consumer

Despite their national difference, the National Consumers' League, the Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative Guild expressed a vision of the ethical consumer as a universal figure with profound social obligations and as a body with immense potential social power. In this precise sense, these groups were consumer activists. They endowed the consumer with explicit moral duties and the potential to rectify contemporary injustices in co-operation with others. It will not do to claim that these visions of the ethical consumer motivated distinctive strategies of action across national contexts, as these cultural visions escaped national borders. Furthermore, the Christian Social Union shows how activists could engage in similar tactics without adopting the same vision of the ethical consumer. They embedded their understanding of the ethical consumer within the framework of explicitly Christian ethics. Moreover, they downplayed the purchasing power of consumers, preferring to cast purchasing as an individual moral issue.<sup>47</sup> Consequently, they have more in common with earlier activists that used consumer-centered strategies such as abolitionists.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> In the *Economic Review*, an early publication of the Christian Social Union, one often finds a labor or producer-centric theology, wherein they describe God as a producer. By analogy, this leads many of the authors to identify with the worker as a producer over and against the consumer. See, "A Defense against 'Sweating'", Henry W. Wolff, *Economic Review*, Jan 1894.; "A Dialogue on Co-operation", J.M. Ludlow, *Economic Review*, Apr. 1892, p. 227.

<sup>48</sup> I address abolitionists' consumer politics directly in the following chapter.

This is not to deny the legitimate differences between the National Consumers' League, Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative Guild. There were important differences in their organizations, the class and gender backgrounds of the membership, and, of course, their national characters. The National Consumers' League collected middle- and upper-class women, with men serving ornamental roles in the group's membership (Kish Sklar 1995). The Co-operative Wholesale Society consisted of working class men, for the most part, and gradually opened up to women in the early twentieth century, while the Women's Co-operative Guild attracted working-class women (Redfern 1913; Webb 1927). These latter two organizations saw themselves as emissaries of a co-operative movement, replete with stores and co-operative brand products.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, the Co-operatives pursued a more radical form of consumer politics than their American counterparts. Consequently, as I turn to concrete problems such as mobilization and organizational conflicts, I aim to specify when these differences shape what activists did and when they were less salient.

But if these similarities were limited to a vision of the ethical consumer, then one could claim that I overstate the case for taking these groups as consumer activists. Consequently, in the next chapter I investigate how these groups attempted to make their visions of the ethical consumer a reality. These activists' used sensory techniques to reveal the hidden conditions of production to consumers. If they could just place the right pictures before the consuming public—of debilitating and dirty sweatshops, in particular—then the public would become the ethical consumers of their visions.

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<sup>49</sup> The Christian Social Union, like the NCL, drew from more stable, educated “middle” classes, especially those of clerical backgrounds (although not necessarily only clerics themselves, but their children).

## Chapter 2 – Commodity Fetishism and Consumer Senses

To illuminate the kind of universal vision and total solution that gripped these consumer activists, we can look to the strategies and tactics that they used to create ethical purchasers. When they addressed the public as potential ethical consumers, activists encountered a problem: how to reveal the often unsavory origins of commodities so that consumers would be encouraged to purchase just goods. But to do this, consumer activists had to speak for the anonymous commodities that were silent about their origins. As such, their appeals to the public worked by means of these commodities. If they could make these goods speak of their origins to the consumers, then activists would stand a much better chance of inducing ethical consumption.

In the following chapter, I identify the centrality of figurative and literal sensory techniques to activists' strategies for encouraging ethical purchasing. These literal and figurative techniques allowed consumers to "perceive" the otherwise imperceptible connection between elaborate social relations of labor and the commodities produced by these relations. I show that their reliance on sensory techniques can be explained by the theory of commodity fetishism. In their reliance on sensory techniques, consumer activists committed themselves to the "ethical power of the senses"—the notion that consumers would be moved to purchase goods ethically because they "perceived" the social origins of commodities.

Thus, we can begin to see one set of problems that arose as activists sought to realize their vision of the ethical consumer. While attempting to encourage ethical consumption, commodities mediated activists' appeals to the public. To successfully

appeal to the public, they had to unveil the origins of commodities. But to do so required that activists' represent commodities as having value because of their origins. After all, to be an ethical consumer *required* that one have some sense of one's responsibilities to physically and culturally distant laborers. Activists employed these sensory techniques to help secure these responsibilities to distant laborers. In this way, attempts to illuminate the conditions of physically and culturally distant laborers follow from activists' vision of the ethical consumer and from the character of commodity production in capitalist societies.

In addition to establishing another similarity between these activists, this chapter also suggests a more satisfactory account—with respect to consumer activism—of what social movement theorists call “framing.” By examining activists' principles and strategies in light of commodity fetishism, I propose a relationship between consumer activists' means of persuasion and the development of capitalism. Whereas social movement theorists have sometimes glossed framing as a generic attempt to produce shared definitions of a situation, I show how consumer activists' sensory techniques (frames) arose through their on the ground engagement with a canonical problem of capitalist societies—the fetish of commodities.<sup>1</sup> While I can only gesture toward the implications for the study of consumer activism more generally, I offer the following principle to guide such inquiry: to the extent that consumer activists employ sensory techniques to make the social character of work perceptible to consumers at the point of purchase, they engage the phenomenon of commodity fetishism directly.

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<sup>1</sup> For calling my attention this explicit connection to the notion of framing, I am grateful to Rick Biernacki.

To explain the significance of consumer activists' shared sensory techniques, I first provide an account of commodity fetishism. Further, I show how the phenomenon speaks to the inability of consumers to perceive the social relations of production in the commodities they purchase. This prepares us to appreciate how commodity fetishism speaks directly to the question of what consumption means. Next, I examine the sensory techniques employed by these activists. I show that these strategies sought to connect the social relations of production to the commodity at the point of purchase by means of figurative and literal "seeing." This reveals how these strategies reflect activists' engagement with commodity fetishism *and* their commitment to the ethical consumer. I then compare turn-of-the-twentieth-century activists with their abolitionist predecessors and Taylorist attempts to reform the labor process. These suggestive comparisons underscore the twin roles of commodity fetishism and activists' commitment to the universal ethical consumer in shaping their work.

#### Commodity Fetishism as a Problem of Consumer Sense

Marx's theory of commodity fetishism is controversial. Consequently, it is essential to clarify what commodity fetishism means as well as its implication for consumers before proceeding to the analysis. In the following section, I show that Marx's account of commodity fetishism points to a basic concern with consumer sense perception and use of goods in a capitalist society—the consumer's inability to perceive the social relations of production in the commodity at hand.

Marx describes commodity fetishism as a "definite social relation between men themselves which assumes...the fantastic form of a relation between things." (1977: 165)

Often in a capitalist society, the social relations of commodity producers become evident only in the act of exchange. Exchange entails a relation between two commodities—money and the specific good or goods purchased. The purchaser is unable to perceive the social relations of production that make the commodities possible. This is why Marx writes, “If I state that coats or boots stand in a relation to linen because the latter is the universal incarnation of abstract human labor, the absurdity of the statement is self-evident.” (169) Commodity fetishism entails this inability to perceive the elaborated social organization of concrete labor relations as anything but immaterial, “suprasensible” aspects of the commodity form (165). The labor process is fundamentally obscure to the consumer at the point of exchange.

Thus, one consequence of commodity fetishism is the inscrutability of a good’s elaborate process of production to the consumer who receives it in exchange (165-167, 169). But from the perspective of the consumer, this inscrutability is not a problem of ignorance that can be remedied by teaching the consumer where goods come from; it inheres in a society characterized by the private production of goods for exchange on the market (165).<sup>2</sup> Why? Because the commodity, as Marx repeatedly tells us, *appears* a trivial, obvious thing in the act of exchange.<sup>3</sup> No amount of knowledge of where the good comes from resolves the experience or appearance of commodities in a capitalist society.

This is one implication of Marx’s statement that it was “absurd” to treat commodities as

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<sup>2</sup> In a capitalist society, production for the market is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a good to earn the name of commodity. A good becomes a commodity given two other conditions, an extensive division of labor and a regime of private property (Marx 1977: 169-173). See also Balu (1977: 47-48).

<sup>3</sup> Throughout the section, Marx refers to the appearance of the commodity in contrast with the subtleties that arise through its analysis. The “appearance” Marx refers to occurs by and through the exchange of goods. Take, for instance, his discussion of how useful objects become commodities: “Since the producers do not come into social contact until they exchange the products of their labour, the specific social characteristics of their private labours appear only within this exchange.” (165)

the “universal incarnation of abstract human labour.” As consumers, the experience of commodities and especially of exchange value as obvious things is not a perceptual error. Of course, it is surely the case that any elaborated pre-capitalist system of production (especially mercantile trade) would produce a similarly inscrutable commodity from the perspective of the consumer at the point of exchange. In a capitalist society, however, the issue of inscrutability becomes a normal or typical problem. For this reason, while this inscrutability may obtain in other historical modes of production, it is noteworthy that it becomes more extensive and common *collective* problem since the 1700s.<sup>4</sup> In a capitalist society, consumer activists often express their dissatisfaction with the market as a means of connecting production and consumption—the market obscures the character and value of commodities as objects involving real labor and real people. In this way, commodity fetishism offers a simple theory of consumer experience in a capitalist society characterized by the private production of goods for public exchange via the market (Marx 1977:169).

But why should we begin from the premise of commodity fetishism when seeking to analyze consumer activism? Such an approach challenges settled sociological wisdom in studies of consumption. Many sociologists avoid Marxist theory in the study of consumption for at least two reasons: (1) it entails a negative evaluation of consumers and consumption<sup>5</sup> and (2) it overlooks or ignores the varied meanings that consumers’ develop themselves. With respect to the issue of negative assessments of consumption,

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<sup>4</sup> On the rise of “long-distance advocacy” since the sixteenth century, see Stamatov (2013). On eighteenth and nineteenth-century forms of collective concern about the origins of goods, see Breen (2004); Glickman (2009); Sussman (1994)

<sup>5</sup> On negative value judgments in Marxian terminology, see Miller (2004: 204); Torrance (1995: 112-120); Woodward (2012: 685); Zukin (2004: 254)

one need not dig very deeply into Marx's writing to find statements that impugn consumers. For instance, Marx observes "by equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labor as human labour. They do this without being aware of it." (166) One could take this as an indictment of delusional consumers and many do. (Miller 1995: 28; Torrance 1995: 119-120; Woodward 2012: 985) But as I have suggested, commodity fetishism is more usefully treated as a necessary practical response to the commodity form that can result in intellectual delusion.<sup>6</sup> In this way, we can appreciate the inescapable practical implications of commodity fetishism. From the abolitionist movement and early twentieth century consumer activists to the contemporary Anti-Sweatshop movement and the organic movement, groups have addressed their activism toward purchasers who cannot perceive the social relations of production across a range of different commodities—sugar, rum, clothing, and many others.

The second issue concerns Marx's indifference to the meanings that actors attribute to their own consumption. Just as with the first objection, there is a grain of truth to such claims. As Luke Sutherland argues, the section on commodity fetishism satirizes bourgeois economists and bourgeois consumers.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Marx's system

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<sup>6</sup> I see no reason to follow Torrance in using the language of delusion to describe commodity fetishism in general. Torrance conflates the practical or phenomenal experience of commodity fetishism with the intellectual errors it occasions. If commodity fetishism is delusional, it is a delusion with a practical basis in the social organization of production, circulation, and exchange in capitalist societies. Thus, it has a certain phenomenal or apparent truth. To call it a delusion requires an analytical perspective on the dynamics of capitalist production, which is precisely what Marx articulates in *Capital*. If anything, bourgeois economists are in the thrall of such delusions. As consumers, Marx himself, bourgeois economists, laborers, and everyone else would be subject to the same practical "delusion."

<sup>7</sup> Sutherland argues that Marx's use of "Gallerte" as a noun, which has been rendered "congealed" in English, plays on the meaning of a specific commodity—a gelatinous substance used in jams, jellies, and the like, which consists of boiled animal tissue, bones, fat, and muscle. As such, Marx's decision to render

demonstrated little analytical interest in the consumer. But I argue that we can use commodity fetishism to illuminate the meanings that people attribute to consumption. In fact, we can draw on commodity fetishism to investigate the significance or meaning of purchasing practices within the broader context of the supply chain that makes it possible. Scholars of consumption remind us that people attribute meanings that are unconstrained by, or at least relatively independent of, processes of production and circulation (Campbell 1987; Gabriel and Lang 2006; Miller 2012). But consumers' inability to perceive the labor process behind commodities poses a meaningful issue for anyone who seeks to incorporate the processes of production and circulation into the meanings of purchasing in capitalist societies.<sup>8</sup>

As a practical issue, commodity fetishism entails obscure relations between the labor process and commodity in the eyes (and senses) of the consumer.<sup>9</sup> But it does not follow that in invoking commodity fetishism, one reduces the meaning of consumption to the fetish of commodities alone. More importantly, if the researcher can show how the fetish of commodities becomes a problem for consumers, it *is* central to the meanings that those consumers attribute to their purchases. Turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer

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the human labor that lies behind the commodity form as "Gallerte" satirizes bourgeois consumers as cannibals. See Sutherland (2008: 6-11).

<sup>8</sup> In this sense, commodity fetishism establishes a practical limit or bound to the meaning of consumption, but it does not select or force people to accept such a meaning. On limiting and selecting causes, see Wright, Levine, and Sober, (1992: 147-150).

<sup>9</sup> In addition to consumer experience, commodity fetishism relates to the abstract character of capitalist societies, wherein commodities are valuable for the purposes of exchange. This dual nature of commodity fetishism reflects Marx's distinction between use-value and exchange-value. As such, we would expect activists' to employ imagistic sensory techniques to address the former and abstract, intellectual strategies to address the latter (e.g. statistical data about labor, wages, the workforce, etc.). This is in fact what many activists do. I focus on sensory techniques in this paper to illuminate the first half of the problem. But the reader must bear in mind that commodity fetishism comprises both concrete and abstract aspects. I would like to examine this more complicated dynamic in future research. On the broader implications of commodity fetishism, see Torrance 1995: 112-120, 165); for a clear account of real abstractions in capitalist societies, see Sewell (2008: 524-527)

activists illustrate one such attempt to make the practical issue of commodity fetishism a problem for consumers. In general, consumer activism offers an opportunity to examine instances where people incorporate labor conditions into the meaning and significance of consumer practices. To put it simply, for researchers commodity fetishism can serve as a tool to account for the way that some consumers attribute meanings to purchases on account of the relations between the labor process, commodities, and consumers. Rather than override the meanings that people attribute to their purchasing, commodity fetishism can help explain one meaning for which activists often reach.

#### Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Consumer Activists

At the turn of the twentieth century, the National Consumers' League, Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative Guild sought to illuminate the relations between producers and commodities for consumers. By exploring these groups' initiatives, we will see how these consumer activists engaged with the phenomenon of commodity fetishism. As I have already shown, they were committed to the consumer as a universal agent of social change with ethical responsibilities—the ethical consumer. As such, these groups offer an important case of modern consumer activism, instances of which have been evident since the Anti-Slavery campaigns of the eighteenth century through the present.<sup>10</sup> These turn-of-the-twentieth century activists' can be usefully understood as part of the transatlantic discourse of progressivism, focused as they were on addressing similar social questions of wealth concentration, mass production, immigration, and urbanization (Rodgers 1998). As such, my purpose in this

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<sup>10</sup> For analogous discussions, see Glickman, *Buying Power*, (2009: 7-13); Lewis and Potter (2011: 7-8); Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012: 5-8)

chapter is not to compare the National Consumers' League (NCL), Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS), and Women's Co-operative Guild (the Guild) as discrete groups. Rather, I establish basic similarities in their attempts to produce ethical consumers, while acknowledging their distinctive contexts.

#### Consumer Activists' Sensory Techniques

In promoting the ethical consumer, the NCL, CWS, and the Women's Guild attempted to render the social relations of labor behind the commodity perceptible to consumers. I distinguish between two sensory techniques: figurative and literal. Figurative techniques involve the use of sensory language to encourage consumers to imaginatively perceive the labor process behind the commodities they purchased. By expanding consumers' capacity to perceive the social relations of labor behind commodities, these activists hoped to motivate ethical purchasing. Literal techniques depended on consumers' senses—usually vision—to associate commodities with previously invisible working conditions and to see them with their own eyes. Often literal techniques and figurative techniques were intertwined. But literal techniques demonstrate that consumer activists relied on more than language and imagination in their efforts to stimulate ethical purchasing. In both figurative and literal sensory techniques, these activists' reconstructed consumers' sense perceptions to encourage ethical purchasing. In doing so, they addressed the obscurity of the labor process in consumers' engagements with commodities.

I have called this tendency to rely on the power of sense perception—figurative or literal—to compel ethical action a commitment to the ethical power of the senses. We can

distinguish activists' sensory techniques and commitment to the ethical power of the senses by focusing on the collective action problem activists wanted to solve. For instance, one may imagine that turn-of-the-twentieth marketers appealed to the senses in similar ways. Marketers certainly aimed to overwhelm the senses and induce purchasing through elaborate shop window displays, store demonstrations, posters, and much more.<sup>11</sup> However, while turn-of-the-twentieth-century marketers may have used ostensibly similar techniques, it is fair to say that marketers were unconcerned with the consumers' relations to laborers and the related collective action problem. For activists, consumers' invisible relations to laborers contributed to the collective action problem of inducing ethical purchasing.

#### a) Figurative Appeals to the Senses

The NCL, the CWS, and the Women's Guild suffused their rhetoric with sensory metaphors and imagery to encourage ethical purchasing. These figurative strategies took two distinct, but interrelated forms. First, activists used sensory metaphors as a way to describe changes in consciousness. The sensory powers were a means of encouraging moral action. Such metaphors are common in Western culture and do not in and of themselves tell us anything about activists' engagement with commodity fetishism. Second, activists' employed sensory metaphors to make consumers perceive or imagine the social conditions of labor and attach such images to commodities, despite their inability to physically perceive them. These metaphors reveal consumer activists' direct engagement with commodity fetishism. Such enhanced perceptions attempted to

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<sup>11</sup> On advertising during this period, see Leach (1993); McGovern (2006); Rappaport (2000: 142-177); Richards (1990); Strasser (1989).

represent the social relations of production to consumers by means of the commodity. Moreover, they were intended to motivate a specific act—ethical purchasing. Because activists relied on sensory techniques to connect producers, commodities, and consumers, they addressed an issue in capitalist societies as opposed to generic issues that attend any social division of labor. Further, I show that these distinct figurative techniques were often employed together. In the process, even generic metaphors for consciousness intimated the consumer’s ability to imagine the conditions of production.

In official publications and literature, consumer activists used sensory metaphors, especially visual ones, to describe the transformation in consciousness that consumer activists sought. In the League’s Second Annual Report, Florence Kelley described the NCL as a “practicable method” for mobilizing the pity and ethical sentiments of consumers. Later in the report, Kelley asked whether purchasers could be induced to give preference to justly made goods, by which league members meant goods made in clean environments by workers treated fairly. In addition to growing numbers of Consumers’ League members, Kelley answered with the following: “In view of our investigation, the bargain counter is seen in a new light...The point is henceforth to *know how the cheapness of our bargains is attained.*”<sup>12</sup> The task of the consumer activist was to attach emotions such as pity to the knowledge of existing conditions. Where could one turn to induce such an attachment? The NCL sought to cultivate a spirit that “...changes passive approval, appropriation, and sympathy into that dynamic conscience which constrains its owner to *look* into a subject and act upon the convictions gained in *looking.*”<sup>13</sup> Kelley

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<sup>12</sup> *NCL Annual Report, 1900-01.*, p. 14, italics in original

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14, italics added for emphasis

employed a visual metaphor for the League's work to transform consciousness. By looking into the origins of the commodities they buy, consumers would learn to purchase justly.

Percy Redfern, a prominent member of the CWS, identified producing and consuming powers, with a clear sensory bent: "The powers of producing and consuming are to the normal human being as left hands and right. Or, better, still, the hands are the producers, and the mouth that eats and the eyes that see the beauty of the world are consuming powers and those that feed the desires of the heart by which the hands are governed."<sup>14</sup> Vision and taste, the consuming powers, nourished the heart and, by extension, *guided* the hands that produced. In this vein, the Women's Guild rendered an iconic image of "The Woman with the Basket", woven basket resting on her knee, gazing out across an urban, industrial landscape into a sunlit sky. This woman possessed the earthly power to shape and reshape not only what was produced, but the lives of those that produced it. She was depicted in terms of her power to see beyond her immediate surroundings [see Figure 1]. Taken on their own, however, these sensory metaphors for knowledge and consciousness reflect a common use in Western culture.

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<sup>14</sup> *The Story of the C.W.S.* 1863-1913, p. 291.



Figure 1: The Women with the Basket, an image published in the Co-operative News, 01/02/1909; Courtesy of the Women's Co-operative Guild, Manchester, UK

But in other instances activists blended sensory metaphors for consciousness with sensory metaphors that aimed to bridge the gap between producers and consumers. In these instances, we can appreciate how these sense metaphors address the fetish of the commodity—not simply a generic tendency to associate the senses with imagination. Perceiving the cloistered processes of production became the source of conviction, a means of transfiguring passive sympathy into an active ethical practice. One member of the Women’s Guild captured this sentiment in an 1892 essay entitled “Shopping”: “It does seem strange, when we think of it, how lightly and thoughtlessly we go out shopping, how easily we let the money slip through our fingers, money that has cost thought and toil and weariness.” Later in the essay the author, a member of the Women’s Guild identified as Katy, lamented, “If we could only have a ‘magic mirror’ that would show us the beginning and end of the ‘bargains’ and cheap goods which look so attractive...we should need no more arguments.”<sup>15</sup> Her sympathetic prose invited readers to peer into the dingy, desolate rooms where anonymous goods were produced and to see the “pale women and girls” who produced them. Moreover, her use of ‘we’ asked readers to identify as a consumer, whose duty it was to remedy inhumanely sweated labor and other unjust conditions through conscientious purchasing. In describing the work of the Consumers’ League of New York, Maud Nathan drew on sensory metaphors to render the “dark places” where “unseen and unheard” workers toiled in dismal conditions. Like Katy, Nathan reported, “those who go down into the depths, never return

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<sup>15</sup> Katy. “Shopping” in *Co-operative News*, 06/11/1892, pp. 638-9. This essay, as well as another, shared the first prize in a Women’s Guild competition to discuss the significance and practice of shopping. Both this essay and the other, “Shopping and How to Do it”, make explicit reference to the conditions under which goods were produced.

with the same light hearts.”<sup>16</sup> Sensory metaphors encouraged a change in consciousness and to reveal the social relations of production behind commodities to the consumer.

Members of Co-operatives and the NCL employed sensory metaphors in their laments about consumers’ failure to perceive as well. An editorial on “The Poor Consumer”, a popular figure in co-operative rhetoric, bemoaned the noxious influence of advertising on the consumer and asked, “Will the consumer also awaken from his long Rip van Winkle sleep and rub his eyes till the truth dawns upon him?”<sup>17</sup> Florence Kelley suggested that a failure to see undermined the power of the purchaser: “The power of the purchaser, which is potentially unlimited, becomes great, in practice, just in proportion as purchasers become organized and enlightened, place themselves in direct communication with the producers, inform themselves exactly concerning the conditions of production and distribution, and are able thus to enforce their own will instead of submitting to the enticement and stimulus of the unscrupulous advertising seller.”<sup>18</sup> The failure to see also allowed consumers to be manipulated by unscrupulous merchants and advertisers. In an article from 1908, Kelley described the responsibilities of the consumer to the “unseen young servants” who both manufacture and deliver goods.<sup>19</sup> These visual metaphors provided tools for consumers to perceive the social organization of labor in their engagement with commodities. Furthermore, they steeled the consumer against the

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<sup>16</sup> “Forward by the President”, *The Work of the Consumers’ League of the City of New York*, 1915. p. 6

<sup>17</sup> “The Poor Consumer”, Editorial in *The Co-operative News*, 11/17/1906, p. 1354

<sup>18</sup> “Aims and Principles of Consumers’ Leagues”, Florence Kelley. *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 5, No. III, Nov. 1899.

<sup>19</sup> “The Responsibilities of Consumers”, Florence Kelley. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 32, Supplement 22. Child Labor and Social Progress. Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Meeting of the National Child Labor Committee. p. 109

appeals of advertisers, who made it more difficult to overcome the mystifications of the commodity form in practice.

Sometimes, however, consumer activists lamented their dependence on sensory techniques. In justifying the League's exhibits (next section), Florence Kelley expressed her frustration with visual techniques: "We are an eye-minded nation. We love shows and pictures of all kinds. We buy our food and clothes according to the shop window displays, or to pictures and legends painted on barns and hoardings, or printed on the covers of magazines...the multitude of thoughtless spenders are guided by their eyes."<sup>20</sup> But Kelley's lament did precede a call for different techniques. Rather, she treated this sensory dependence as a fact: "The exhibit is prepared and kept in circulation in recognition of these facts."<sup>21</sup> Co-operators expressed similar concerns. One co-operator explained that a longstanding suspicion of advertising "died hard", despite the ill-effects on co-operative trade: "Paint, paste, and polish would not be necessary, and glare and glitter could very well be done without."<sup>22</sup> Many viewed advertising as manipulation, which clashed with the co-operative educational mission. But despite these reservations, both co-operators and the NCL did their best to appeal to an "eye-minded nation."

Overall, these figurative techniques involved attempts to transform consciousness and to render the social relations of producers sensible to consumers at the point of exchange. While it would be a mistake to claim that all of activists' figurative techniques addressed the fetish of the commodity directly, those imaginative attempts to illuminate

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<sup>20</sup> "Report of the Secretary", *NCL Annual Report 1914-1917*, pp. 20-21

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21

<sup>22</sup> "Time and Trade: Should Co-operative Societies Advertise?", R., *Co-operative News*, 09/04/1909, p. 1137

obscure chains of working conditions *and* connect them to consumer goods clearly did so. Furthermore, we have seen that activists often combined these figurative strategies in practice. This reveals how attempts to penetrate the commodity fetish reshape the meaning of consumption. Rather than simply replicate a common linguistic practice, activists attached a more precise meaning to the use of sense metaphors. Thus, when Florence Kelley identified the “convictions gained in looking”, even though she used a generic sense metaphor for the imagination, the metaphor resonated with the attempt to unmask the commodity form. In fact, Kelley employed that language in response to the question, “could purchasers be induced to give the preference to goods made under the right conditions.”<sup>23</sup> These sensory metaphors advanced the project of ethical purchasing explicitly. For consumer activists, to look into the issue of one’s purchasing decisions required one to imaginatively perceive the labor that resulted in the commodity. Both figurative appeals suggested the ethical power of the senses—a direct connection between perceiving unjust working conditions and ethical action. For the NCL, the CWS, and the Women’s Guild, these sensory metaphors would encourage ethical purchasing by drawing a connection between the labor process and the commodity from the perspective of the consumer.

#### b) Literal Appeals to the Senses

But activists’ built on these figurative sense perceptions and contemporary technologies to allow consumers to associate metaphorical images with specific commodities and to literally perceive the working conditions behind the commodity.

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<sup>23</sup> “Report of the Secretary”, *NCL Annual Report*, 1900-1901, p. 12

Upon opening a copy of the Second Annual Report of the National Consumers' League (1900-1901), one finds an image of the League label, shaped like a bowtie, with the following phrase: "Goods bearing the above label are made in factories in which—The State factory law is obeyed; All the Goods are made on the premises; Overtime is not worked; Children under sixteen years of age are not employed."<sup>24</sup> The use of a label, indirectly, exhibits one central way that NCL techniques rested upon literal and not only figurative senses. The label allowed the consumer to associate metaphorical images of the production process with particular commodities. This label was attached to articles of clothing, in particular, and encouraged an imaginative engagement with the commodity. Through a specific act of seeing a branded or labeled commodity, consumer activists sought to conjure up images of a clean, fair workplace in contrast with dirty, unjust ones. But I show that such literal techniques went beyond a reliance on physical perception to associate mental images of the workplaces with specific commodities; they often relied on the circulation of workplace photographs as well as public and private exhibitions of just and unjust goods. These literal techniques involved photography and methods of display such as exhibitions and lantern lectures. As with figurative techniques, literal ones were accompanied by a commitment to the ethical power of the senses.

The NCL, CWS, and the Women's Guild used labeling strategies to encourage ethical consumption. Such strategies remain bound closely with figurative ones as labels did not literally depict the workplaces where commodities were produced. For the NCL, the label was a tool for activating ethical senses. The League supplied approved factories

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<sup>24</sup> *Second Annual Report 1900-1901*, inside front cover.

with the label, which the manufacturers affixed to the goods—mostly clothing—in the factory. When the goods arrived at the shops, the label was already attached. Because the League did not operate their own stores, it was vital for them that the label remained attached to the goods in question. The label bridged the commodity and figurative perception of the labor process through an act of literal seeing. If the label was stripped from the clothes, it undermined its purpose of uniting the good with the labor process. Members of the Consumers' League of New York raised the issue that some stores were removing the League label *prior* to putting the goods out for sale and assuring concerned purchases that the goods were League-approved. A member wrote, "New York merchants frequently 'hide their light under a bushel' and though selling garments properly bearing our label frequently cut it off, or stow the clothes away in such quiet corners that customers are not aware of their presence."<sup>25</sup> League members were concerned with the invisibility of the label, which suggests that actually seeing the label affixed to particular commodities mattered. It was a tool for activating ethical senses and inducing ethical purchasing.

The Co-operatives pursued a distinctive, but analogous attempt to label goods. Because the CWS were merchants, they could be relatively certain that co-operative goods would bear the label.<sup>26</sup> One who saw the C.W.S. brand would be able to envision a clean, wholesome workplace where the employees were paid and treated well. Like the NCL, co-operators presented their brand as a bridge between literal and figurative

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<sup>25</sup> "Committee on Label", *The Work of the Consumers' League of the City of New York*, 1915, pp. 35-36

<sup>26</sup> However, local wholesale societies were not required to stock goods exclusively produced in co-operative industries for co-operative stores. But reports of labeling issues analogous to the kind experienced by the Consumers' Leagues are scant.

strategies to encourage ethical purchasing. As such, many co-operative advertisements took pains to show that the products were made under “the best conditions of labor.”<sup>27</sup> In co-operative publications, one can find in-depth descriptions of co-operative goods at various moments in the supply chain. An account of co-operative tea, for instance, began with the tea plantations and ended in the London factory where the tea was cured and packaged.<sup>28</sup> Such accounts included pictures of the workers and their environment. But it was not always easy to maintain the integrity of the co-operative brand and label. In 1906, when they discovered that sweated laborers in London were producing matchboxes with the Co-operative label, co-operators opined that the co-operatives claimed to produce “pure” goods, even if they were not able to “scent” out traces of sweating in every case.<sup>29</sup> The editors contrasted the “scent of the sweater”, which was difficult to trace, with the case of the matchboxes, which had “come to light.” Thus the possibility of keeping the label pure rested upon the ability to uncover and see sweatshop conditions in a figurative sense. Co-operators relied on this figurative and literal sense to secure appropriate action, i.e. ethical purchasing. Provided that co-operators could preserve the integrity of the brand, actually seeing a co-operative label would allow consumers to imagine fair working conditions in contrast to a sweatshop. The label was a tool for associating the commodity with images of the labor process—figurative or literal. But labels did not provide their own images, rather they relied on others.

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<sup>27</sup> This text comes from a 1916 advertisement for co-operative clothing, see *Co-operative News*, 1/22/1916, p. X. Advertisements for Co-operative products appear in many Co-operative publications, whether the national weekly, *Co-operative News*, local monthly papers published by individual co-operative societies, and co-operative journals such as the *Wheatsheaf*.

<sup>28</sup> The article spanned two issues of *The Manchester and Salford Monthly*: October 1908, Vol. XX, No. 239, pp. 206-210; November 1908, Vol. XX, No. 241, p. 228

<sup>29</sup> “The Taint of the Sweater”, Ed. *Co-operative News*, 05/26/06, p. 583.

For instance, both groups relied on photography to allow consumers to see into the labor process. The NCL circulated published photographs of working conditions extensively. Between 1905 and 1914, the NCL Annual Reports included photographs of tenement working conditions that identified the goods produced there, from cigars and artificial flowers to clothing and bread.<sup>30</sup> The 1905-06 Annual Report included photographs of flower makers, home workers finishing garments in a New York tenement, workers in a New York garment sweatshop, pasta drying in a tenement hallway, a cake and cruller bakeshop in a tenement, a candy factory with an adjoining bedroom, an image of an overcrowded tenement house, a shack where berry pickers lived during the picking season, and cranberry pickers. Some League pamphlets consisted almost exclusively of photographs of workers and their working conditions.<sup>31</sup> In contrast with the NCL, co-operators used photographs to document virtuous, co-operative events rather than illuminate the obscure conditions of production.<sup>32</sup> But co-operatives did circulate images of co-operative productions in their publications. The aforementioned accounts of the co-operative supply chain were published in movement periodicals such as *The Wheatsheaf* and were reprinted in local co-operative publications. From bacon and cake flour to biscuits and tea, co-operators depicted the virtuous working conditions that attended the production of co-operative goods.<sup>33</sup> In general, these techniques encouraged

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<sup>30</sup> *The NCL Annual Report, 1905-06*, pp. 4, 13, 24, 28, 36, 38, 40, 44, 45, 48, 49

<sup>31</sup> *Children Who Work in the Tenements*, The Consumers' League of the City of New York, March 1908;"Appendix VII", *What the United States Government says about Child Labor in Tenements*, New York Child Labor Committee, March 1911

<sup>32</sup> See, *The Manchester and Salford Monthly Herald*, October 1900, Vol. XII, No. 143.

<sup>33</sup> "A 'Corner' in Biscuits", *Manchester and Salford Monthly Herald*, March 1908, Vol. XX, p. 47; "Bacon", *Manchester and Salford Monthly Herald*, May 1910, Vol. XXII, No. 257, p. 93; "C.W.S. Drug Works", *Manchester and Salford Monthly Herald*, Vol. XXII, No. 261, pp. 170-173.

consumers to take in actual images of workplaces and associate them with specific commodities, thus encouraging ethical purchasing.

The attempt to demystify commodities by means of ordinary perception is best exemplified in the various exhibitions circulated by these consumer activists. Each group relied on exhibitions of goods. These ranged from public, traveling exhibitions of sweated goods to local meetings where people were able to see, touch, and sometimes taste goods, while learning about their origins. Co-operative Reports are rife with instances of co-operative exhibitions.<sup>34</sup> A member of the Oldham co-operative society described an 1894 exhibition as “an object lesson in co-operation.”<sup>35</sup> This meant that co-operative exhibitions of goods were a celebration of the ability of the working classes to produce high-quality, non-sweated goods. Participants could take these goods in and appreciate their working-class origins. Members of the Women’s Guild developed similar exhibitions of co-operative products for use at conferences throughout England: “Our idea is that the guild shall possess a box of goods which shall be sent round to the various towns where the conferences are held[.]”<sup>36</sup> It was also common for local Women’s Guild conferences to provide samples of co-operative goods, while also taking in lectures. Sometimes these events involved “lantern lectures”—lectures accompanied by photographs projected as slides—on the virtues of co-operation.<sup>37</sup> Explicit information about the content of the slides is difficult to come by, but it is clear that Guild members

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<sup>34</sup> For instance, “On the Trail of the Sweater” described a conference with displays of sweating conditions in the chocolate, confectionary, trade biscuits, jellies, and pickle-making trades. “On the Trail of the Sweater”, *Co-operative News*, 03/14/1914 ; on the significance of exhibitions to the Co-operative movement, see Gurney, *Co-operative Culture*, pp. 79-80

<sup>35</sup> Cited in Gurney, *Co-operative Culture*, p. 80

<sup>36</sup> “The Annual Report of the WCG”, *Co-operative News*, 5/23/1891, p. 518

<sup>37</sup> On lantern lectures and turn of the twentieth century humanitarianism, see Kevin Grant, *A Civilised Savagery: Britain and New Slavery in Africa, 1884-1926*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 39-78.

used these lantern slides to encourage ethical purchasing. Several reports of Women's Guild events identify lantern lectures on "Cocoa", "Soap", "Flour", and a range of other goods.<sup>38</sup> These events paired photographic images and accounts of working conditions with demonstrations of co-operative goods; there the consumers could perceive the producer and commodity together.

The NCL engaged in analogous exhibitions of just and unjust goods. Exhibitions of labeled garments were such a common strategy that one member of the League wrote that "chronicling them would be a hopeless undertaking."<sup>39</sup> These events involved displays of goods bearing the NCL label along with photographs of the factories from which these goods originated.<sup>40</sup> For major expositions such as the 1915 Panama-Pacific in San Francisco, the League used large screens or slides that depicted "unfavorable industrial conditions" and the League's work to remedy those issues, including samples of goods made in tenements [See Figure 2].<sup>41</sup> In the years from 1914 to 1917, this exhibit visited 28 states. Other exhibits were available by request for smaller local groups. These comprised photographic replicas of the large screens, samples of tenement made goods, and slides of ideal working conditions.<sup>42</sup> In at least one instance, a Massachusetts garment factory hosted a lecture, exhibition of labeled goods, and a tour of the premises.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> "Co-operative Production", *Twenty-Seventh Annual Report of the Women's Co-operative Guild*, May 1909-1910, pp. 12-13; "Bristol Society: Report of the Women's Guild", *Annual Co-operative Congress, 1906*, pp. 159-160; *Sixteenth Annual Report of the Co-operative Women's Guild, April 1898-1899*, p. 5

<sup>39</sup> "A Factory Entertains a League", *NCL Annual Report 1902-03*, p. 15.

<sup>40</sup> "Exhibits of Labeled Goods", *NCL Annual Report 1901-02*, pp. 21-22

<sup>41</sup> "Report of the Committee on Exhibits", *NCL Annual Report 1914-1917*, p. 46

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46

<sup>43</sup> "A Factory Entertains a League", *NCL Annual Report 1902-03*, pp. 15-16.



PRODUCTS OF TENEMENT CHILD LABOR.

Figure 2: An image from an exhibition. In the pamphlet, *Children Who Work in the Tenements: Little Laborers Unprotected by Child Labor Law*, The Consumers' League of the City of New York, March 1908. Courtesy of the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

The League also helped to construct exhibitions by other groups that addressed themes such as industrial conditions, urban congestion, public health, and more. Florence Kelley described the League's contributions as "bringing out in every way the relation of the consumer to the conditions under which work is done."<sup>44</sup> Designed to "attract the attention of the passer-by", these exhibitions built on ordinary perception in order to demystify the commodity and encourage ethical purchasing.<sup>45</sup> In addition, league members could also host private exhibitions in their homes, which encouraged the purchase of ethically-made goods.<sup>46</sup>

By juxtaposing goods with images of their origins in ways that people could actually perceive, activists placed literal perception in the service of figurative techniques for reconstructing consumers' perceptions. They aimed to join the social processes of production and the commodity together for the consumer at the point of purchase. In the process, activists relied on the ethical power of the senses to bring this ethical consumer into being. By perceiving the obscure processes of production, consumers would be moved to seek out goods that were produced in desirable working conditions and avoid those produced in undesirable ones.

#### Labor Reform, Sensory Techniques, and Historical Predecessors

To clarify the role of commodity fetishism and activists' visions of the ethical consumer in shaping turn-of-the-twentieth-century activists' sensory techniques, I offer two brief discussions for the purposes of comparison – advocates of "scientific management" and earlier abolitionists. In the first instance, Frederick Taylor used

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<sup>44</sup> "Exhibitions", *NCL Annual Report, 1906-07*, pp. 17-18

<sup>45</sup> "Sub-Committee on Exhibits", *The Consumers' League of the City of New York*, 1914, p. 26

<sup>46</sup> "Committee on Label", *The Work of the Consumers' League of the City of New York 1915*, p. 37.

sensory techniques in his campaign to reform the labor process. But these had everything to do with illuminating the principles of efficiency in production to which they had devoted themselves. The sensory techniques were generic and supported the real evidence and principles derived from the “scientific” studies of the labor process. Without the same pressures to overcome the fetishistic perceptions of consumers, Taylor had no need to unveil any particular conditions of production. This comparison shows that we should distinguish between sensory techniques that unveil particular conditions of labor and those that illuminate general principles. In the second instance, abolitionists anticipated some of the sensory techniques for encouraging ethical purchasing employed by turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists. At the same time, their efforts reveal a distinctive, less “modern” vision of the ethical consumer. Crucially, abolitionists appealed to people as ethical, often Christian agents—not just or primarily consumers. Thus, this recalls the central role of activists’ visions of the ethical consumer in guiding their strategies. In addition, the comparison with abolitionists roughly periodizes turn-of-the-twentieth century consumer activism by illuminating their distinctive appeal to consumers as ethical agents. Ultimately, these preliminary comparisons suggest a basic analytical proposition: to avoid falsely attributing the use of sensory techniques to commodity fetishism rather than generic social trends, one must demonstrate that activists use these techniques to draw connections between the labor process, the commodity, and the consumer. Moreover, these sensory techniques were intended to illuminate specific labor conditions rather than abstract principles. In so far as modern consumer activists do this, one can argue that they address commodity fetishism.

This proposition suggests that sensory techniques offer a historically-grounded account of a common “frame” that emerges when people seek to reform the labor process by appealing to consumers. Snow et. al imported the concept of a frame into the study of social movements from the work of Erving Goffman. In general, frame refers to the interpretive lens through which people understand their world or “schemata of interpretation.” (1986: 464) Importantly, Snow et. al claimed that frame alignment between social movement organizations and individual actors was a *necessary condition* for social movement participation (1986: 464, 467, 476). Since then, the notion has been incorporated into the standard lexicon of social movement scholars (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2003; Tarrow 2012). One consequence of casting frame alignment (and thereby frames) as a necessary condition of social movement participation is to sever “frames” from their historical context. For social movements to arise, frames must be involved, regardless of their specific content or the context in which they were articulated. By comparing attempts to reform labor conditions over time, I reconnect the frames that activists’ use to their content and historical context. I will have more to say about the implications of this later. For now it suffices to note that unlike frames, sensory techniques cannot be transposed onto other movements without sufficient historical and comparative justification.

#### a) Frederick Taylor and Scientific Management

We can bring out the distinctiveness of consumer activists’ sensory techniques by comparing their strategies for joining the labor process, commodities, and consumers to other reformers’ accounts of the labor process. Fortunately, Frederick Taylor and other

engineers set out to reform the labor process during the period. But their reform attempts circumvented consumers and they dealt with the processes of production more directly. Consequently, by underscoring the kinds of sensory techniques Taylor and others employed, we can appreciate one distinctive aspect of consumer activists' sensory techniques. When activists' depicted the labor process through figurative and literal techniques, they insisted on the *particular* relationship between the labor process and the commodity. In contrast, the advocates of scientific management used images of the labor process to highlight the *general* principles of scientific management. As such, these advocates presented highly intellectualized images of the labor process that underscored the scientific principles behind their labor reform proposals. In these accounts, the relationship between the labor process and the commodity was entirely superfluous and often irrelevant. For the sake of simplicity, I treat the work of Frederick Taylor as an exemplar, especially his attempt at popular exegesis, *The Principles of Scientific Management*. While Taylor had a battery of supporters and competitors, he became the fulcrum around which the movement for scientific management coalesced.<sup>47</sup>

As is well-known, scientific management entailed a commitment to reorganizing the workplace to foster greater efficiency. According to Taylor, scientific management referred to a "philosophy" of work that encouraged maximum output, workplace harmony, and individual efficiency as well as prosperity (1947: 130, 140). Such outcomes would result from scientific study of the labor process—especially time study, division of managerial labor, standardization of the labor process in accordance with

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<sup>47</sup> On scientific management, see Taylor (1947); Gilbreth (1912); Hoxie (1966 [1915]); The Taylor Society (1929); Nelson (1980)

scientific knowledge, differential piece rates, and “mental revolutions” on the part of management and workers (ibid.: 100-101, 130). By retraining and reorganizing the workforce in light of scientific knowledge, Taylor and his acolytes claimed that scientific management would resolve the apparently natural antagonism between employers and employees. Employees would abandon inefficient slowdowns or “soldiering,” while employers would abandon inefficient management practices.

The writings of Taylor and other scions of scientific management are populated with figurative images of the workplace. In his introduction to *The Principles of Scientific Management*, Taylor wrote: “We can see and feel the waste of material things. Awkward, inefficient, or ill-directed movements of men, however, leave nothing visible or tangible behind them. Their appreciation calls for an act of memory, an effort of the imagination.” (ibid.: 5-6) To aid this imagination, Taylor included many deductive “illustrations” of efficient and inefficient workplace practices. Thus, he prefaced his discussion of pig iron handlers with repeated assertions of what this example illustrates. The example illustrates “the tremendous force and effect of” this new science of management. It illustrates the complicated “science of handling pig iron”. Moreover it illustrates the impossibility of workmen comprehending the science of handling pig iron on their own (ibid.: 40-41). The examples themselves stress wages, quantities and rates of material moved, and the variables that affect these rates and quantities. While his illustrations provide obsessive details about pig iron handling or bicycle ball bearings, these details demonstrate the importance of Taylor’s scientific approach to labor management. It is telling that many of Taylor’s most detailed stories such as the pig iron handler “Schmidt” were at best half-

truths.<sup>48</sup> Rather than seek to connect the nature of labor to specific commodities, Taylor used these images to underscore the virtues of scientific management and the vices of common industrial practices.

One can identify similar strategies in other advocates of scientific management. To illuminate the inefficiencies of current payment practices, Taylor disciple Frank Gilbreth reported an incident “seen some years ago”: We had occasion to visit a factory, and saw a girl putting four-ounce lots of the factory’s product into pasteboard boxes. Her duties were simply to put exactly four ounces of merchandise into each pasteboard box and to put the cover on.” (Gilbreth 1912: 28-29) After instructing the young woman of a more efficient “economy of motion,” she improved her performance until the visitors moved on and promptly resumed the old style of motion. When asked about this, she replied, “What’s the use; the boss here cuts the piece rate when any girl earns over \$6.00 per week.” (ibid.: 29) Stories of this nature ignore the connection between the work and the commodity entirely. The objects of her labor are simply “merchandise” or “the factory’s product.” Gilbreth relayed the story only to dramatize the inefficiencies of piece rate payments and standard managerial practices. Even attempts at “applied” scientific management, the connection between the goods manufactured and the labor process is obscure. Frederic Parkhurst’s *Applied Methods of Scientific Management* takes a concrete look at the virtues of scientific management as applied in a “press and die” factory (1912: 181-185). Even “concrete examples” subordinate the goods produced to the methods of insuring their efficient production.

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<sup>48</sup> On Schmidt and Taylor’s parables, see Kanigel (1997: 315-323, 396-399)

In general, advocates of scientific management were not interested in depicting literal images of workplaces. Most of the images that did make it into scientific managers' tracts were highly technical. They were filled with charts and diagrams, but little in the way of workplace images akin to those circulated by consumer activists. Even when Taylor did rely on literal images of the workplace, he was careful to present these images in light of his scientific system of management. For instance, Taylor hosted visitors interested in his system of management at his home outside of Philadelphia. He greeted them in the morning and treated his guests to a two-hour monologue on the virtues of scientific management. These monologues were replete with stories about pig iron handlers such as "Schmidt" designed to captivate the audience. After lunch, Taylor would take the visitors on a tour of two models of scientifically-managed firms—Tabor and Link-Belt. The former manufactured molding machines while the latter manufactured "conveying equipment and belting." Taylor had substantial input into the organization of both firms and implemented a range of management strategies. These strategies included elaborate sets of written instructions for workers, precise wage schemes, slide rules for each piece of machinery, and many more including stopwatches for timing workers' tasks.<sup>49</sup> As usual, the purpose of these visits was to demonstrate the effectiveness of Taylor's system.

Whereas consumer activists relied on enhanced sense perception to draw connections between the labor process, commodities, and the consumer, advocates of scientific management relied on enhanced sense perception to make the abstract

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<sup>49</sup> On visits to Taylor's home and the model factories, see Kanigel (1997: 389-402); Nadworny (1955: 14-33)

principles of scientific management more plausible. Consequently, we can distinguish between images of the labor process that address the particular distortions of the commodity form (consumer activists) and those that address generic failures to perceive. As Taylor himself noted, “awkward, inefficient, or ill-directed movements” left “nothing visible or tangible behind them.” (1947: 5) But the modest efforts he and his followers made to enhance sense perception were largely rhetorical attempts to convince others of the value of scientific management. By contrast, consumer activists needed to convince consumers of the direct, particular connection between the labor process and the goods they purchased. Otherwise, the project to induce ethical purchasing would have lost its ethical edge.

#### b) Abolitionists

While activists’ sensory techniques differed from the generic strategies of their contemporaries, we can identify some direct predecessors to their particular kind of sensory techniques in eighteenth and nineteenth century abolitionists. By juxtaposing turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists with their abolitionist predecessors, we stand to appreciate how visions of the ethical consumer informed their activism. Although they employed analogous sensory techniques, abolitionists were committed to less universal visions of the ethical consumer. Consequently, they were less likely to use sensory techniques to advocate consumer activism in general. Rather, abolitionists advocated that ethical purchasing, if it did occur, would occur because people had duties as Christians, especially—not as consumers.

The abolitionists in England anticipated turn-of-the-twentieth-century activism in their attempt to establish long-distance solidarity with workers through purchasing.<sup>50</sup> For example, a 1791 abolitionist pamphlet declared, “every person who habitually consumes one article of West Indian produce is guilty of the crime of murder[.]”<sup>51</sup> Just like later consumer activists, British abolitionists identified the consumer as causally and morally responsible for workers’ suffering and death. Furthermore, they sometimes sought to reconnect consumers and produces through the use of sensory techniques. Abolitionists’ made the rhetorical appeals that demonstrated the physical connection of the consumer of slave-grown sugar to the slaves themselves. The slaves’ blood and sweat polluted the sugar that British colonists purchased, both literally and figuratively. By drawing this connection through striking imagery and appeals to the sympathy of the consumer, abolitionists addressed the practical inability of consumers to sense the labor involved in commodity production. But the techniques that British abolitionists employed were not just figurative. They also circulated photographs, paintings, and stylized images emblazoned on goods as a means of identifying with the abolitionist cause.<sup>52</sup>

But while eighteenth and early nineteenth century British abolitionists developed an understanding of the consumer as powerful and responsible, they did not stress the consumer’s universality. In addition, their sensory techniques were not so closely yoked

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<sup>50</sup> A more thorough comparison must address the relationship between chattel slavery and capitalism, but such questions are beyond the scope of this chapter. While it is clear that chattel slavery contradicts a basic principle of capitalist societies—free labor—historians acknowledge that slave labor was essential to the development of capitalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially. The literature on abolitionists is vast and diffuse. For some notable works, see Davis (1966); Drescher (2009); Hochschild (2005).

<sup>51</sup> Cited in Sussman (2000: 43)

<sup>52</sup> For an account of the visual iconography of the anti-slavery movement, see Kurasawa (2014); on the circulation of the abolitionist “brand” among the English middle classes, see Stamatov (2013: 159-160)

to an obvious ethical duty to purchase non-slave made goods. Many British abolitionists insisted on abstention from the purchase and use of slave-produced sugar and rum. Furthermore, anti-slavery societies often pursued figurative efforts to demystify slave-produced commodities. Often they used poems and literature to render the images of suffering workers and attach them to specific commodities like rum and sugar. British women's Anti-Slavery Societies stressed reading about slave conditions as a means of encouraging political action (Sussman 2000: 130-147). As such, with the exception of the images of slavery, the sensory techniques used by early abolitionists remained figurative. Even these images were designed to evoke sympathy with the slave more than to perceive the conditions in which they toiled.<sup>53</sup> With respect to consumers' universality, British abolitionists' moral appeals did not rest, ultimately, on the role of the consumer and the causal connection between consumer and producer. Rather, it referred to other social roles and identities. If the consumer was universal, it was only implicitly so; the abolitionists were not *consumer* activists.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, American free produce supporters put forth another robust understanding of consumer universality, power, and responsibility.<sup>54</sup> Some explicitly identified American slavery as a way to supply consumers with commodities—an explicit celebration of consumer power (Glickman 2009: 73-76). And their generic accounts of the consumer accentuated the universality of the consumer

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<sup>53</sup> While transformations in visual technology and especially photography undoubtedly contribute to differences between abolitionists and turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists, such questions could be answered by a more systematic comparative analysis. For now, it is sufficient to note that the sensory techniques of abolitionists were designed to evoke sympathy with the slave, while later consumer activists emphasize responsibility for unfair conditions.

<sup>54</sup> In this paragraph, I draw on Glickman (2009: 61-89); Glickman is the only contemporary historian to address these American abolitionists as consumer activists.

identity, even if these groups did not portray themselves as consumer activists. Furthermore, they employed sensory techniques intended to unite the labor process and commodity from the perspective of the consumer. Free produce advocates, many of them Quakers, opened stores dedicated to the sale of non-slave made goods. One supporter wrote the following about stores that sold slave-made goods: “Go to yonder store, and the products of oppression will stare you in the face. Look! And you will see the pro-slavery pictures there exhibited.”<sup>55</sup> While these stores were not filled with “pro-slavery pictures” in a literal sense, these free produce advocates sought to brand slave-made products by using sensory metaphors. In 1851, abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet stated, “The sugar with which we sweetened our tea, and the rice which we ate, were actually spread with the sweat of slaves, sprinkled with their tears, and fanned by their sighs.”<sup>56</sup> Abolitionists employed such sensory metaphors in an attempt to facilitate an imaginative identification with the slave and to portray their working conditions to the consumers who were responsible for these evils.

But there are important distinctions to be drawn between turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists and mid-nineteenth century abolitionists. First, each of these abolitionist groups saw themselves not as consumer activists, but as abolitionists.<sup>57</sup> Lawrence Glickman notes that free produce advocates, Sabbatarians, and Southern nonintercourse advocates “neither defined themselves as consumer activists, nor understood themselves to be fighting on behalf of consumers.” (2009: 63) For this reason,

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<sup>55</sup> Cited in Glickman (2009: 79)

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> On the evangelical character of this activism, see Abzug (1994); Young (2005); Bolt and Drescher, (1980).

their understanding of the consumer as an identity or actor was more limited than later activists. They did not see themselves as consumer activists, but as anti-slavery advocates. Second, abolitionist groups focused exclusively on physically remote slaves, while much of the later activism included a substantial number of domestic but invisible workers. Furthermore, later activists addressed a wider range of labor practices, from tenement labor and sweatshops to forced overtime and employment of children. Third, predecessors' sensory techniques were predominantly figurative. While they circulated visual representations of slave conditions, they focused on the imagination as a means of securing ethical purchasing and were less concerned to depict images of working conditions.

### Conclusion

In light of their commitment to the ethical consumer, these turn-of-the-twentieth century activists needed to address a practical dilemma entailed by commodity fetishism—turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists sought to demystify commodities. Further, they trusted in the ethical power of the senses to induce ethical purchasing. It is easy to see why. After all, the history of consumer activism tells us that many different groups have sought to illuminate the provenance of anonymous commodities. I have argued that commodity fetishism can explain activists' reliance on techniques to salvage consumers' senses.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, this argument suggests useful

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<sup>58</sup> In Lawrence Glickman's landmark history of consumer activism in America, he identifies a "denigration of the importance of the senses" that accompanied the emergence of "modern consumer activism." "The force of one's actions as a consumer," he writes, "typically extended far beyond the local, making it necessary to relegate the senses to a lesser order power, in favor of an understanding of the causal impact of consumption along the axis of distant markets." Glickman (2009: 47)

comparative directions for the study of consumer activism, humanitarianism, social movements, and social action, to which I will return in the conclusion.

Ultimately, activists' direct engagement with commodity fetishism may have the ironic consequence of reinforcing the fetishism that they sought to surmount. By seeking to connect the commodity to the social relations of production through the consumer's perspective, they re-establish the commodity as the consumer's means of relating to the labor process and laborers. It was this very situation, where people relate to one another by means of a commodity, that Marx sought to dramatize in his discussion of commodity fetishism. Thus, activists' reliance on sensory techniques may help explain, more precisely, the limits of ethical purchasing schemes.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, this exposes one reason that activists were able to pursue strategies of action that accorded with their commitment to the ethical consumer. To bring their vision of the ethical consumer into being, activists needed to show people the origins of their goods. In doing so, consumer activists focused on the nature of the goods themselves. This was a task that followed closely from the notion that consumers were responsible to the physically and culturally distant workers that produced their goods. Of course, not all of the problems that activists' confronted aligned so well with their vision of the ethical consumer. But when it came to devising strategies for inducing ethical consumption, activists' transnational commitment to the ethical consumer seems more relevant than their myriad contextual differences.

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<sup>59</sup> For more systematic discussions of the limits of focusing on consumers, see Robins (2012); Szasz (2007); for more philosophical or conceptual arguments, see Zizek (2009: 52-55); Bauman (2008: 109-193)

However, it would be short-sighted to reduce activists' similarities to commodity fetishism alone. That the National Consumers' League, Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative Guild arrived at similar visions of the ethical consumer and strategies for bringing them into being requires a more elaborate discussion of their motives. I address the further motivational sources of activists' analogous ethical visions and sensory techniques next.

### Chapter 3 – The Motives of Consumer Activists

I have presented the strikingly analogous visions of the ethical consumer and sensory techniques for joining the labor process, consumer, and particular commodities “shared” by the National Consumers’ League, Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women’s Co-operative Guild. But I have provided only one plausible reason for these analogies: activists’ engagement with commodity fetishism. In their techniques for encouraging ethical purchasing, activists’ efforts were shaped by the fetish of commodities. At the same time, this very formulation suggests that commodity fetishism is not sufficient to account for their visions of the ethical consumer. After all, the insensible links between the labor process, consumers, and commodities became a problem in light of their vision of the ethical consumer. Thus, while commodity fetishism shaped the techniques that these groups pursued, it cannot account for their motivation to pursue these techniques in the first place. In this chapter, I examine this question of motivation: what motivated consumer activists to develop these shared repertoires of action?<sup>1</sup> When consumer activists identified most shopping as thoughtless and sought to solve this by allowing consumers to peer into the abyss of production, what concerns were they responding to?

To provide an answer, I examine activists’ accounts of consumers, consumer morality, and psychology. This reveals important, interlocking similarities that run through each of these groups. First, and perhaps most obviously, each of these groups found justifications for the importance of consumers in developing capitalist social

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<sup>1</sup> To condense the language, I repurpose Tilly’s (2006) phrase “repertoires of contention” as “repertoires of action.” This captures both activists’ visions of the ethical consumer and their sensory techniques for inducing ethical purchasing.

institutions. In particular, they identified mass production and intense competition for consumers as vindications of the consumer's importance. Second, these groups employed a moral language that resonated with burgeoning Christian social reform movements. Interestingly, however, the reasons for this convergence differ. The co-operative groups identified their claims to moral authority with Christian moral teachings. Thus, even though the Co-operatives were not a self-consciously Christian organization, they made moral claims that marked them as an implicitly Christian group. By contrast, the National Consumers' League invoked Christian moral principles as one set of moral principles among many. But they relied heavily on ancillary Christian organizations to disseminate the League's work. Consequently, their path to a Christian moral language occurred through the organizational pressure to disseminate their message widely, whereas the co-operatives embraced Christian moral authority more directly. Third, these groups exhibited similar naturalist accounts of individual psychology. In particular, I focus on the notion that individuals were the outcome of social and natural forces beyond their control and, frequently, their comprehension. But these groups were committed to reforming these forces that buffeted people about. As such, they embraced what literary critic Charles Child Walcutt described as an "optimistic" stream of naturalist thought (1956:24-29). If people could come to an enlightened understanding of the forces that shaped their lives, they would be able to control these forces in some way. Thus, by understanding consumer activism as forged in the crucible of capitalist institutions, Christian social reform movements, and naturalist psychology, we can appreciate how these groups converged upon such similar repertoires of action.

The chapter proceeds in several steps. First, I begin by clarifying what I mean by “motive.” I treat motives as interpretations of social phenomena that provide action imperatives as well as justify actions undertaken. This account demonstrates that motives need not be only in people’s heads or only ad hoc justifications for what they have done. Rather we can treat their own accounts as illuminating certain motives for action in their characterization of the world that they confront. Thus, the motive lies in the world as interpreted by the actors, not just in their heads or in direct interactions with others. Then I address the ways that activists were motivated by capitalist institutions, Christian social reform movements, and naturalist psychology to address social problems via the consumer. I conclude by embedding these shared motives within a broader account of the political and legal context that rendered activists’ interpretations of the consumer even more plausible. Despite their differing contexts, I offer an explanation as to why the National Consumers’ League, Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women’s Co-operative Guild converged on similar repertoires of action: they interpreted analogous social phenomena and often drew similar conclusions about what those social phenomena meant for their own actions. In the process, this chapter illuminates how “abstract” and “imperceptible” social phenomena such as capitalism, Christian social reformism, and naturalist theories of mind can become evident in actors own accounts of their world and their actions. I conclude by placing these motives in context of the opportunities available to reform-minded activists at the turn of the twentieth century. This allows us to appreciate why these motives had a similar force for activists in the National Consumers’ League, Co-operative Wholesale Society, and Women’s Co-operative Guild.

### A Few Words on Motive

Before I investigate the motives that shaped turn of the twentieth century consumer activism, I want to say a few words about motives. Typically, when one talks of motive, one talks of a subjective or interior psychological experience. But such talk unsettles sociologists as they tend to seek out non-subjective or psychological influences on action. In his justly celebrated account of motives, C. Wright Mills criticized “inferential” conceptions that stress motives as “subjective ‘springs’ of action.” Rather than such inferential accounts of motives, Mills advocated an account of motives as “typical vocabularies having ascertainable functions in delimited social situations.” (1940:904) Subsequently, many have drawn a clear distinction between motives as causes (the inferential conception) and motives as justifications produced in specific social situations (the vocabulary of motives conception) (see Campbell 1996; Martin 2011:14n13; Vaisey 2008:1676-1677). In some instances, sociologists abjure any interest in motives whatsoever because they are “psychological facts.” (Abend 2014:9) Even critics of Mills’ overzealous distinction between types of motive can rely on primarily psychological descriptions of motive (Reed 2011:136). Ultimately, overwhelmingly “social” conceptions of motive (Mills) and overwhelmingly “psychological” conceptions of motive (Reed) efface a more dynamic understanding (Campbell 1996:103). In this dynamic understanding, motive causes as in subjective “springs” of action *and* motive justifies as in offers reasons for acting.

Consequently, when I use the term ‘motive’, I refer to interpretations of [social] phenomena that supply action imperatives and justify actions undertaken. This builds on

Weber's classic statement on motives as a "complex of subjective meaning which seems to the actor himself or to the observer an adequate ground for the conduct in question." (1978:11) But I adapt rather adopt Weber's language for several reasons. First, my phrasing underscores the role that motives play in impelling and justifying action.<sup>2</sup> While Weber's definition of motives does not make this clear on its own, his subsequent discussion of subjective and causal adequacy elaborates on this distinction between motives as both impelling and justifying action (1978:11-12). Second, my phrasing emphasizes the connection between the interpretation and the phenomenon or phenomena interpreted. In short, I simply want the reader to easily recall that these are interpretations of worldly phenomena.<sup>3</sup> Thus, we can appreciate how motives arise in and through worldly experiences that are both imaginative and practical. To refer to motives in this way requires inferences about psychological springs of actions or interpretations of phenomena that supply action imperatives.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, we can ground these inferences empirically in people's accounts of their world. In particular, by attending to the problems people identified and the solutions they offered, we can appreciate their motives as of the world, not merely of themselves.

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<sup>2</sup> Campbell demonstrates that Weber's discussion contained this ambivalence as well (1996:103-104). For Campbell, this ambivalence is an advantage because it rejects the false choice between action as either meaningful and voluntary or coerced and determined. Moreover, if motives do play any causal role in our actions, then sociologists will be ill-prepared to identify them when they are treated mainly as post-hoc justifications.

<sup>3</sup> The point is to stress that these interpretations are interpretations of something. We need not suppose that the interpretation follows from the worldly phenomena as a matter of course. For instance, while consumer activists employed sensory techniques in response to the phenomenon of commodity fetishism, their particular response was bound up with their vision of the ethical consumer. Others who act without such grand visions of ethical consumers would not be susceptible to the influence of commodity fetishism *in the same way*.

<sup>4</sup> It should go without saying that these are not the only motives at work in any given action or set of actions. I only claim that these motives are relevant to turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists' development of similar repertoires of action. In fact, subsequent chapters will address how other motives related to social class, nationality, and gender become relevant to their actions.

### Consumer Activists' Motives

Thus far, I have shown that the National Consumers' League, Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative Guild shared a repertoire of action. This repertoire of action includes their visions of the ethical consumer and the sensory techniques they employed to make this vision a reality. The ethical consumer was universal, had clear social responsibilities, and the power to rectify injustices. The sensory techniques included a range of figurative and literal efforts to join the labor process and commodities from the perspective of consumers. This repertoire of action was distinctive from those of other consumer activists and other reformers. What were some possible sources of this shared repertoire of action? My discussions of these shared repertoires of action suggest one obvious source: capitalist social institutions. Thus, I begin by examining activists' descriptions of the consumer as both a problem and solution. Consumers were a problem in so far as they were insufficiently aware of their responsibilities to physically and culturally distant workers. They were a solution in so far as they became aware of their social power and responsibility. If I am to claim that "capitalist social institutions" motivate their activism, I need to show that activists' interpretations of the consumer are bound up with descriptions of capitalist social institutions. In doing so, I will be able to clarify which institutions they perceived as relevant to their activism. But a closer look at activists' descriptions of the consumer as a problem and solution calls attention to other relevant motives: Christian reform movements and naturalist psychology. I discuss each of these three—capitalist social institutions, Christian reform movements, and naturalist psychology—in turn.

### a) Capitalism and the Consumer

We know that the National Consumers' League, Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative Guild insisted on the universality, responsibility, and significance of the consumer. But we can learn still more about *why* the consumer appeared so significant. In the following section, I examine activists' accounts of the consumer and identify three features of capitalist societies that informed their repertoires of action: 1) identifying the public as consumers, 2) concerns about intensified competition and, especially, advertising, and 3) the anonymity of mass-produced consumer goods.

Activists were confident that consumers mattered. In a discussion of the importance of a projected 1895 budget surplus, the editors of the *Co-operative News* wrote: "If co-operators do not exercise some pressure in this matter, if they give no sign that they are alive to the interests of the consumers generally, the other side – the side of the interests – will have it all their own way."<sup>5</sup> Lillian Wald, speaking at the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Consumers' League of New York, trumpeted this political and civic centrality of consumers:

It [the Consumers' League of New York] started...right...giving a respectful ear to the grievances and complaints from the people...And, hearing the message, the founders of the League used their intelligence and their inspiration to interpret these grievances to the consumers, that they might be roused to a sense of their responsibility for the young girls who served them from behind the counters.<sup>6</sup>

But these activists were under no delusions that the public would come to similar understandings on their own. "The prime responsibility of the consuming public," wrote

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<sup>5</sup> "The Next Budget", *The Co-operative News*, 01/19/1895, pp. 60-61

<sup>6</sup> *Twenty-Five Years Years of the Consumers' League of the City of New York*, 1916. p. 14

Florence Kelley of the NCL, “is it[s] own ignorance....The principle task of the League is to enlighten men and women who are eager to do right if they can but know what is right.”<sup>7</sup> A co-operative editorial took a similarly dim view of living, breathing consumers: “Whatever the personal merits of the consumer may be – and these are subject to wide diversity – none can doubt the social importance of his functions.”<sup>8</sup> While the consumer was clearly significant, activists’ could not rely on consumers to discover their ethical and moral duties by themselves.

Despite consumers’ presently dubious ethical character, there was no question *that* the consumer had certain ethical responsibilities. Before elaborating on the role of Consumers’ Leagues, Florence Kelley noted that evidence of these duties lay “ready to hand.” Consumers needed only to pay attention to those who sold them daily newspapers or worked in shops to learn about their working conditions.<sup>9</sup> Kelley concluded these observations by insisting that “the consumer is the indirect employer and can by no means escape a share in the moral responsibility for the employment.”<sup>10</sup> In an article on luxury goods, one co-operative supporter wrote, “We need not say anything more right now about the duty of seeing that luxuries are produced under fair conditions to the workers, because that duty applies to *every kind of thing produced*, as much the necessary loaf of bread as the most delicate iced pudding. [emphasis added]”<sup>11</sup> When Florence Kelley wrote, “The prime responsibility of the consuming public is its own ignorance”,

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<sup>7</sup> Florence Kelley, “The Responsibility of the Consumer”, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 32, Supplement 22, Child Labor and Social Progress. Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Meeting of the National Child Labor Committee (Jul., 1908), p. 108

<sup>8</sup> “Labor and Consumption”, Ed., *The Co-operative News*, 10/01/1892

<sup>9</sup> Florence Kelley, “The Responsibility of the Consumer”, pp. 108-109

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. pp. 108-109

<sup>11</sup> “Luxuries”, *Co-operative News*. 8/11/1894

she meant that the public needed to be educated about how to purchase goods ethically. The question was not *if* the consuming public had a duty to unseen producers of goods, but whether they could become aware of this duty.<sup>12</sup>

What features of their world as it related to consumers made these duties obvious to activists? This is a question about motive. Activists' descriptions of the consumer located these duties in the fabric of capitalist society. For one, they identified the public as consumers. This gesture illuminates the extent to which they interpreted their world in light of the expansion of the market – an essential characteristic of capitalist societies (Marx and Engels 1848:12). Percy Redfern described the fault lines in a capitalist society as follows: “There is a division between a numerical minority of owners, with their friends and dependents, and a majority of workers; and there is also another division co-existing between the antagonistic interests of capital and labor and the interest of the public as the universal consumer.”<sup>13</sup> In the meetings leading up to the formation of the National Consumers' League, Maud Nathan noted, “It [the White List] has succeeded in great measure in arousing public sentiment against long hours for clerks and paved the way for a Consumers' label if sufficient demand for it is created.”<sup>14</sup> A Women's Guild editorial entitled “Educating the Purchaser” concluded that purchasers were at the mercy of shop proprietors in particular, noting “that the public has very little means of judging

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<sup>12</sup> “The Responsibility of the Consumer”, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 32, Supplement 22. Child Labor and Social Progress. Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Meeting of the National Child Labor Committee (Jul., 1908), pp. 108-112.

<sup>13</sup> *Story of the C.W.S.*, p. 81

<sup>14</sup> Maud Nathan, First Meeting of the “Conference on the Federation of Consumers' Leagues” 05/16/1898. Reel 14, Slide 240

whether he is a fair dealing man or not.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, co-operators often contrasted the “private” appropriation of profit, which one found in a shop (non-co-operative business), with the public profit-sharing of the co-operative store.<sup>16</sup> In an essay about the superiority of co-operative stores, noteworthy co-operator George Holyoake slid from the “people” and the “public” to “customers” and “purchasers”. This elision of the “people” and “consumers” suggests how thoroughly activists identified the public as consumers.<sup>17</sup> Owing to their perceived universality in capitalist societies, activists trumpeted the duties of consumers.

Moreover, because the market played an important part in defining peoples’ roles in capitalist societies, activists interpreted consumers’ roles in light of their ability to transform competitive capitalist societies into co-operative ones. Co-operator Percy Redfern characterized the transformative role of consumers as “economic”: “What superiority there is in the consumer is simply economic. He it is who creates and determines demand, and he alone, justly may exorcise competition. Working from demand to supply – that is to say from human need to human satisfaction – co-operation has to recognize this economic priority.”<sup>18</sup> One retrospective account, published in 1927 by founding member of the Women’s Guild, Margaret Llewellyn Davies, drove this point home explicitly: “The power of the revolutionary weapon – the market basket – has been made clear. Women have been transformed from buyers, ignorant of the economic results of their acts, into intelligent Co-operators, conscious that they can undermine Capitalism,

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<sup>15</sup> “Educating the Purchaser”, *Co-operative News*, Women’s Corner, 03/02/1898, p. 802

<sup>16</sup> George Holyoake, “Anti-Boycott Papers V: The Distinction between the Shop and the Store”, *Co-operative News*. 12/13/1902, pp. 1415-1417

<sup>17</sup> Holyoake, *ibid.* p. 1415.

<sup>18</sup> Redfern, *The Story of the C.W.S.*, p. 111

and making good their right to share in the control of the Movement [co-operation].”<sup>19</sup>Co-operators associated capitalist society with individualistic pursuit of needs, on the part of individuals, and single-minded pursuit of profit, on the part of corporations. In a dramatic piece, the *Co-operative News* noted: “In the amalgamation of consumers for their own help and protection lies the only power that can break the spell of high prices and exorcise those spirits of greed and selfishness that give capitalists the mastery and confer misery upon the workers.”<sup>20</sup> While not at all naïve about the uniqueness of competition and greed, co-operators identified an increased struggle for profit and self-interest within capitalist societies. “How long”, the editors of the *Co-operative News* asked, “is the consumer going to allow himself to remain the shuttlecock to be knocked about in this manner at the will of grasping capitalists?”<sup>21</sup>

Concerns about competition for the loyalties of consumers, especially in the form of advertising and marketing, punctuated these discussions of the consumer. “The ordinary purchaser”, one Guild member wrote, “...requires a great deal of strengthening against the urgency of advertisements.”<sup>22</sup> Co-operators were leery of engaging in advertising themselves and debates about the merits of advertising surfaced periodically in the *Co-operative News*.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, however, most co-operators accepted advertising as a necessary means of advancing their cause. Sometimes co-operators trained their sights on particular marketing tactics such as the case of so-called “Bonus Tea.” Bonus

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<sup>19</sup> *History of the Women’s Guild*, Catherine Webb, “Introduction” by M. Llewellyn Davies, p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> “The Revolt of the Consumer”, *The Co-operative News*, 09/28/1912, p. 1214

<sup>21</sup> “The Poor Consumer”, *Co-operative News*, 11/17/1906

<sup>22</sup> “Educating the Purchaser”, Women’s Corner, *Co-operative News*. 1898. p. 802

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, R. “Should Co-operative Societies Advertise?”, *The Co-operative News*, 09/04/1909, p. 1137; George E. Colpus, “Should We Advertise?”, *The Co-operative News*, 09/07/1907, p. 1130

Tea described a range of marketing strategies wherein merchants sold tea at a slight markup, while offering consumers “complimentary” wares from the same store. One could purchase tea and receive credits to spend on China or silverware, for instance, or in extreme cases, an old age pension after years of loyalty to a particular brand.<sup>24</sup> The Women’s Co-operative Guild indicted Bonus Tea as “bogus” and condemned such advertisements as inducing both thoughtlessness and overpaying on the part of consumers.<sup>25</sup> “The delusion that in this commercial age”, bemoaned one co-operator, “something may be had for nothing dies hard.”<sup>26</sup> In addition to advertising, the Women’s Guild was concerned about the proliferation of credit purchases in stores, which discouraged the virtues of thrift and reason.<sup>27</sup>

Members of the National Consumers’ League were also concerned with intensified competition and the consequences of a market-based industrial capitalist society. Sometimes, they lamented the stresses of competition and the susceptibility of consumers to advertising. Once again, Florence Kelley exemplified this concern in one account of the League’s principles: “Much of the current advertisement, of which the patent-medicine advertisement may be taken as the type, is directly aimed at the ignorance of the purchaser. Nearly all of it is aimed at the cupidity of the public; and it,

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<sup>24</sup> In one instance, an outfit called Nelson’s offered ‘pension tea’, which was marketed to women and sold well above market value. They promised these women a pension later in life, particularly in the event that a woman became a widow. Before paying out any such ‘pensions’, the company was declared insolvent in 1905. See “The Co-operative Conscience”, *Co-operative News*, 02/25/1905, p. 226.

<sup>25</sup> “The Bogus of ‘Bonus’ Tea”, *Co-operative News*, 09/08/1906

<sup>26</sup> “The Co-operative Conscience”, *Co-operative News*, 02/25/1905, p. 226

<sup>27</sup> “Credit in the Stores”, Women’s Corner, *Co-operative News*, 12/24/1898, p. 1452. This concern with credit was heightened by the legal status of women in late Victorian England, who were frequently unable to buy on credit without a husband’s permission. See Rappaport (1996).

therefore, offers cheapness as the one great characteristic.”<sup>28</sup> In addition, the NCL identified stresses on businesses that pushed them to minimize costs and maximize profits. Of course, they codified this concern with competition in their constitution, claiming that “the majority of employers” were “virtually helpless to maintain a high standard as to hours, wages, and working conditions under the stress of competition.”<sup>29</sup> At the 1901 World Exhibition in Buffalo, Florence Kelley accentuated the struggle precipitated by competition across the English-speaking world: “Cutthroat competition among manufacturers, merchant tailors, contractors, and workmen in turn, has forced down the cost of production until filthy workshops, starvation wages, excessive working hours and child-labor characterize the industry wherever it is found in London, New York, Chicago, or Toronto.”<sup>30</sup> Members of Consumers’ Leagues in Massachusetts noted the threefold competition between manufacturing firms, penal institutions, and tenement sweatshops, which created the pressure to exploit laborers all along the supply chain.<sup>31</sup> In their campaigns to reduce working hours around Christmas, League members rendered such competition in concrete terms. They conjured images of “unusual crowds” and fatigued clerks as well as delivery boys.<sup>32</sup> In very practical ways, then, these activists were motivated by the competitive stresses associated with advertising and a public insufficiently awake to their responsibilities to distant laborers.

Finally, activists lamented the anonymity of mass-produced consumer goods. While not in itself unique to capitalist societies, activists’ description of the problem

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<sup>28</sup> “Aims and Principles of the Consumers’ Leagues”, *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. V, No. 3, p. 294

<sup>29</sup> “Constitution: Article III”, *National Consumers’ League*

<sup>30</sup> “Protection for Women”, *Buffalo Express*, 09/30/1901

<sup>31</sup> *NCL Annual Report 1900-01*, p. 10.

<sup>32</sup> “Committee on Publicity”, *The Consumers’ League of the City of New York – 1914*, p. 25

implies specifically capitalist conditions of industry, wherein physical and cultural distance obtained between consumers of staple goods and producers. One co-operator noted, “the trail of the sweater is difficult to scent, and, purchased through the ordinary channels of commerce, it is difficult...to avoid the use of commodities in which some form of sweating or corruption has not entered.”<sup>33</sup> In the first annual report of the National Consumers’ League, Florence Kelley underscored the anonymity of cheap goods with a simple tale of two white cotton underwear manufacturers: a “well-ordered factory” in Richmond, Vermont and tenement production in New York, New York.<sup>34</sup> They produced competitively priced underwear under wildly different conditions. Kelley writes, “The economy which in Richmond, Vt., is made by the application of high intelligence, using the most advanced methods of production, is made in New York City wholly at the expense of the footpower worker, her wages, her home, her health, and all the joy and comfort that depend upon these.”<sup>35</sup> Such a comparison implied that producers and consumers were anonymous to one another. Without the League, consumers would be unable to discern the origins of the goods they bought: “The League”, Kelley noted, “now renders it easy for purchasers to select with knowledge of circumstances [of production]”.<sup>36</sup> The Women’s Co-operative Guild also tied the duty that consumers learn about anonymous goods to conditions of industrial production: “When we women buy anything, let the question in the back of our minds be, ‘Is making this worthy to be the bread-winning work of a human being? Would I care to have it for my own

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<sup>33</sup> “The Taint of the Sweater,” Ed. *The Co-operative News*, 05/26/1906, p. 583

<sup>34</sup> *NCL Annual Report 1900-01*. p. 11-12

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p. 12

employment?”<sup>37</sup> Moreover, if they could keep such questions in their minds, Guild women could “direct the greatest consumers’ organization in the whole world and...control the industry of the world.”<sup>38</sup> When In the context of modern industry, the anonymity of commodities justified the consumer’s duty in activists’ eyes.

Thus, we can see at least three ways that institutions and practices associated with the development of capitalism motivated these activists similarly. First, they identified the public as consumers in general, which reflected their interpretation of expanding markets for a range of mass produced commodities. Second, they sought to counteract the competitive principles encouraged by or in such a society. Activists were especially concerned about marketing and advertising because they reinforced competition as well as ignorance among consumers. Third, the anonymity of mass produced commodities in an industrial system inspired activists to investigate and inform consumers about these goods and the workers who made them. In these practices and institutions, members of these groups saw reasons to pursue their consumer activism. That is, their descriptions of consumers reveal their motivation to organize consumers for the greater good. But these accounts already suggest that capitalist institutions were not alone in motivating their activism. Next, I look at their accounts of consumer morality and duty. In these accounts, we can detect another set of shared motivations.

#### The Ethical Consumer and Christian Social Reform

To discuss the duty of consumers entails some understanding of what that duty is. Without question, members of these groups devoted themselves to consumers. But we

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<sup>37</sup> “Our Duties as Consumers”, Women’s Corner, *Co-operative News*, 01/20/1912, p. 78.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* p. 78

cannot understand this emphasis on consumers without examining the profoundly moral aspects of these activist projects. J.T.W. Mitchell, a pre-eminent member of the C.W.S., identified co-operation as one a beacon of moral uplift: “The three great forces for the improvement of mankind are religion, temperance, and co-operation, and as a commercial force, supported and sustained by the other two, co-operation is the grandest, noblest, and most likely to be successful in the redemption of the industrial classes.”<sup>39</sup> The Women’s Guild fashioned their project as similarly moral one. As one speaker before the Women’s Guild stated, “If we have helped to train women’s minds...developing in them a belief in the new social faith, and if we have helped to give women a field of action in which to carry out this faith, then the harvest of the seeds we are sowing will be reaped by future generation.”<sup>40</sup> By identifying co-operation as a “social faith”, the speaker amplifies the moral conviction that the Women’s Guild sought to cultivate. Florence Kelley, when attempting to formalize the NCL’s very own described the “underlying principles” of the league as “partly economic and partly moral.”<sup>41</sup> The NCL constitution, furthermore, foregrounded the “duty of consumers to find out under what conditions the articles they purchased are produced and distributed and insist that these conditions shall be wholesome and consistent with a respectable existence on the part of the workers.” They did this in the interests of the community and

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<sup>39</sup> J.T.W. Mitchell as quoted in Percy Redfern, *The Story of the C.W.S.* (1913), p. 203.

<sup>40</sup> Eleventh Annual Report, Co-operative Women’s Guild, p. 33

<sup>41</sup> “Aims and Principles of the National Consumers’ League”, *American Journal of Sociology*, November 1899, Vol. 5, No. 3. p. 289.

indict consumers who “seek the cheapest markets regardless how cheapness is brought about.”<sup>42</sup>

These contrasts between political economy and morality, between the economic and the moral, suffuse the way activists talked about the consumer. When they talked about the consumer, moral issues revealed themselves in the superiority of communal values (the common good) and ways of life to individualistic ones, especially as a means of securing the livelihoods of people as individuals. The NCL, for instance, opened their constitution by affirming “the interests of the community” and the value of co-operation.<sup>43</sup> Members of co-operative societies repeatedly identified co-operation as means of harmonizing the activities of individuals. “Co-operators belonged”, one C.W.S. chairman proclaimed, “to no party or sect, but to that great class called humanity, and will strive to do that which will aid the distressed and unemployed everywhere.”<sup>44</sup> They championed the virtues of co-operative, collective behavior over and against competitive, individualistic behavior.

By examining how these groups discussed consumer morality, we can discern the relevance of contemporary Christian Social Reform movements to their rhetoric and practice. In both England and the United States, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century witnessed significant Christian reform movements (Norman 1987; Jones 1986; Curtis 1991). These groups participated actively in attempts to apply Christian principles to “secular” economic life and to address social problems associated with urbanization, immigration, and poverty. Interestingly, the Co-operative groups and the National

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<sup>42</sup> “Article I, II, II”, *NCL Constitution* in Annual Report, 1900-01.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> J.T.W. Mitchell, as quoted in *The Story of the CWS*, Percy Redfern, 1913. p. 161

Consumers' League took distinctive paths to assimilating similar influences. The Co-operatives were steeped in the rhetoric of Christian social reform. Moreover, they drew frequent association between the moral authority of the Christian Church and their own moral authority. While many in the English urban working-class were indifferent to organized religion, the Co-operators accounts of consumer morality resounded with the familiar language of reform-oriented Christianity (Joyce 1980:176-179). By contrast, the National Consumers' League aligned its moral goals with those of the Christian Church owing to the upper-class, religious character of their membership and the desire to spread the word to other sympathetic people. Where the Co-operatives were motivated 'from above' by an apparent commitment to Christian reformist sentiment, the National Consumers' League were motivated 'from below' to appeal to the character of their membership. Thus, this section shows how distinctive organizational sources resulted in analogous motivations for these consumer activists.

#### Co-operative Wholesale Society and Women's Co-operative Guild

Christian reformists—especially Christian Socialists in England and their contemporaries in the Social Gospel movement in America—were committed to remaking the world in accordance with Christian principles, to bringing the gospel down to earth (Curtis 1991; Norman 1987; Backstrom 1974; Jones 1968). To establish Christian reformers' commitment to moralizing everyday life—especially economic life—we can look at the Christian Social Union. Members of this group sought to suffuse secular business practice with an ethical spirit worthy of Christ's message. The CSU constitution identified three central objects: "1. To claim for the Christian law the

ultimate authority to rule social practice. 2. To study in common how to apply the moral truths and principles of Christianity to the social and economic difficulties of the present time. 3. To present Christ in practical life as the living Master and King, the enemy of wrong and selfishness, the power of righteousness and love.”<sup>45</sup> Their broad concern with the moral implications of economic behavior often resulted in more precise attempts to deduce right economic actions from Christian social principles. One pamphlet on religion and wages offered the following, “[contrary to old political economy] we wish to urge upon you that there is no test of the truth of your religion so real as this question: ‘what rate of wages do you pay?’, ‘what wages are paid to the people who make the things which you buy?’”<sup>46</sup> They were keen to establish clear duties for economic activity that realized Christian principles of justice, love, and righteousness.

Co-operators concern to moralize economic came through in their accounts of the purposes of co-operation and the duties of consumers. CWS Chairman J.T.W. Mitchell gestured in this direction when he associated co-operation with Temperance, an overtly Christian movement, and religion, which may be more narrowly read as Christian. Mitchell did not simply associate co-operation with religion and temperance, but claimed that the latter two “supported and sustained” co-operation. But Mitchell’s assertion aside, the language of co-operative publications gained force from the rhetorical associations of their communitarian concerns with the Christian accounts of justice, duty, and brotherly love.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> “Constitution”, 11/28/1905, Box 6.

<sup>46</sup> “Religion and Wages”, A.J. Carlyle, M.A., Sept. 1907

<sup>47</sup> One can find, for instance, extensive advertisements around Christmas and Easter holidays in co-operative publications. These advertisements make no attempt to appeal to Christmas as a Christian

It was quite common, for instance, to encounter active Christian references while advocating for the co-operative consumer, even in these ostensibly nonsectarian co-operative organizations. Co-operative discussions of morality frequently occurred within an explicitly Christian framework. A discussion of women's employment recalled "the truth of that sermon on the position of women preached last Lent."<sup>48</sup> While describing the duty of each co-operative store to purchase their goods from the Wholesale Society, one co-operator recalled Christian principle of brotherly love, "What we want today is to lift our movement out of the cold, dreary region of self-interest into the warm, bright sunlight of mutual help and brotherly love."<sup>49</sup> In the *Manchester and Salford Monthly Herald*, they relayed a parable by a visiting bishop that questioned the morality of consumers taking on debt. The bishop described how he avoided a costly new cathedral that would have replaced the more austere wooden church. The co-operator followed this brief story by observing: "The contentment of this [British] Colombian bishop reminds us of St. Thomas Aquinas grim remark—that churches with wooden chalices had golden priests; but those with chalices of gold had priests of wood."<sup>50</sup> The editors of the *Co-operative News* noted a lag between scientific progress and moral progress, asserting: "One great step forward [in morals] has been made in the change from 'don'ts' to 'do's'. But that was made nearly nineteen hundred years ago when the new commandment was to love

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holiday. Rather, they reinforce the observation that active co-operators may have been more publicly committed to Christian principles than the typical working-class consumer. For example, see, *The Manchester and Salford Co-operative Herald*, December 1906.

<sup>48</sup> "Employment of Women in Shops", *The Co-operative News*, 09/08/1894, p. 1030

<sup>49</sup> "The Duty of the Store to the Wholesale", *The Co-operative News*, 07/04/1891, p. 673

<sup>50</sup> *The Manchester and Salford Co-operative Herald*, Oct. 1900, Vol. XII, No. 143, p. 148

was added to the old commandments of prohibition.”<sup>51</sup> Within Co-operators were comfortable comparing the truth of their mission with that of the Christian Church and they were adept at casually integrating religious sentiments into articles that dealt with co-operative business, advertising, or news of the day.<sup>52</sup>

One inquiry into the “Morals of Political Economy”, lamented the Anglican Church’s lack of explicit moral guidance: “The clergyman can offer less guidance in practical matters, because he must remain within his ‘proper sphere’. This must be specially disappointing to those who feel that moral guidance is what the age needs most, and that the social dangers looming in the future can only be warded off by practical measures founded on moral truth.”<sup>53</sup> The editors alluded to the notion that Co-operation could provide this moral guidance, promised by unrealized by the separation of Church and State into separate spheres. As with the other groups, Co-operators perceived themselves as religiously and politically independent. At times, co-operators drew clear distinctions between religion and politics. Co-operative members were sometimes eager to distinguish the Christian Church as an organization from other groups including, co-operatives: “Is it nothing to professing Christians that a few are working single-handed against the giant who is drawing the life blood out of thousands? Or do they think that *they* are the only ones who labour to help their less fortunate brethren?”<sup>54</sup> Even this criticism intimated that the Co-operatives more effectively realized Christian principles than did the Church. But more commonly, they associated co-operation with the moral

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<sup>51</sup> “Experiments in Morals”, *Co-operative News*, 4/15/16. p. 400

<sup>52</sup> See, for instance “Citadels of Thrift”, *Co-operative News*, 02/10/00, p. 138; “A Homely Chat to Homely Folk,” *The Manchester and Salford Co-operative Herald*, Vol. XX, pp. 242-251

<sup>53</sup> “Morals of Political Economy”, *Co-operative News*, 4/14/88. p.348

<sup>54</sup> “A Few Words on Guild Work”, *Co-operative News*, 3/31/88. p. 307

authority of Christianity directly.<sup>55</sup> It is this association between Christian moral authority and co-operative moral authority that presents Christian reform sentiment as a significant motive that impelled co-operators and gave the movement purpose (for the leaders, at least).<sup>56</sup>

#### The National Consumers' League

The NCL adopted a far more studied and oblique relationship with Christian morality. They sought to institutionalize methods that would make socially-responsible, community-minded action flourish where it had been stunted. John Graham Brooks, the first president of the NCL, made the argument for labor legislation this way:

By as much as the child is deprived of education that will enable him to take up the new pace that industry sets, and then to mature his strength and faculties so he may do his work to his own advantage and to the advantage of society generally, by just so far as we deprive the boy of the chance of lengthening school life, we are not only inflicting rank injustice upon him, we are unjust to the future of the family and to the community. Even the thing called civilization is to that extent defeated and discredited.<sup>57</sup>

These odes to injustice lacked the rhetorical debt to Christian reformers evident in the work of co-operators. Thus, members of the National Consumers' League would refer to the Golden Rule and to the awakening of social consciences.<sup>58</sup> These were generic phrases that resonated with the language of the Social Gospel movement, but were not

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<sup>55</sup> "Free Education", *Co-operative News*, 11/08/90, p. 1138; "The Churches and the Social Question", *Co-operative News*, 10/31/91; "Citadels of Thrift", *Co-operative News*, 02/10/00, p. 138.

<sup>56</sup> Sometimes active co-operators lamented the dividends' paid to members as a distraction from the moral and social uplift promised by "true" co-operation. See, "The Consumers' God", *The Co-operative News*, 01/11/1913, pp. 40-41

<sup>57</sup> "Past and Present Arguments Against Child Labor", *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 27, Child Labor, Mar., 1906, pp. 23-26

<sup>58</sup> "Letter Sent to Boston Firms from Massachusetts Consumers' League", *National Consumers' League Records*, Reel 16, Slide 76; "Report of the Secretary", *Annual Report of the National Consumers' League 1905-06*, p. 23

precise enough to pin the League as a Christian organization. But the League drew heavily on Christian organizations to spread their message.

One might easily attribute this attenuated, but still present, Christian moral sensibility to the organizational prowess and intellectual tendencies of Florence Kelley—the NCL General Secretary and human motor for the group’s first thirty years. Kelley was a committed socialist who agitated publicly and privately on behalf of more righteous distribution and use of wealth. In a letter to her son, Kelley affirmed her admiration for Marx as a political economist and her puzzled lament of the tendency of the urban proletariat to join with the Democrats rather than the Socialists.<sup>59</sup> But she astutely recognized that this socialist angle would have little purchase with the initial members of Consumers’ Leagues, drawn especially from religious and upper-middle class women. In private correspondence to a league member, Kelley wrote, “...it is most encouraging to see how readily the organization [NCL] spreads. The most favorable existing organizations seem to be the churches and the women’s clubs.”<sup>60</sup> Kelley would have understood the moral and ethical appetites of group members, both active NCL officers like John Graham Brooks or sympathizers such as Richard T. Ely and the rank and file membership, recruited through churches and women’s clubs, as Kelley suggested.<sup>61</sup>

The influence of this Christian moral sensibility appears especially “from below.” Whether the Consumers’ League wanted to or not, they were dependent upon the

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<sup>59</sup> “To Nicholas Kelley”, *The Selected Letters of Florence Kelley*, 08/18/1904, pp. 124-125

<sup>60</sup> “To Katherine Lucy Trevett”, *The Selected Letters of Florence Kelley*, 07/25/1900, pp. 106-107

<sup>61</sup> Ely, a professor of Economics at the University of Wisconsin, was also an active member of the Christian Social Union in the United States. John Graham Brooks, too, was affiliated with Christian Socialism as a Unitarian minister and wrote extensively on labor issues.

Christian calendar when designing campaigns, especially a “Buy Early” campaign for Christmas.<sup>62</sup> And members of the Leagues at the national, state, and local levels called upon their natural allies in the clergy and church communities to recruit more members and to educate the public, distributing information about the league in venues such as the *Sunday School Times*.<sup>63</sup> In 1902, for instance, they distributed “one thousand Christmas circulars, with annuals, calendars, catechisms, pamphlets by John Graham Brooks and the *Menace to the Home*.”<sup>64</sup> Such arrangements between Leagues and the Churches were common.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, the NCL was given support and moral ballast by clergy and church organizations. A member of a Michigan Consumers’ League endorsed, for instance, the writings of Bishop Potter, an Episcopal priest devoted to social reform: “Every one who purchases goods is indirectly an employer of labor and is morally bound to give his or her trade to factories and stores which treat their employees honorably and well.”<sup>66</sup> By giving the League’s project an explicit “moral” gloss, Potter reveals the ease with which members could render League projects in the language of Christian social reform, even though the national members strove to avoid religious provincialism. As Kelley noted above, then, the Churches were a natural base of support for the NCL. She often spoke on the League’s behalf at church meetings throughout the calendar year and sometimes even gave sermons from the pulpit.<sup>67</sup> And Kelley was always explicit about the League’s debt to ministers in their Buy Early for Christmas: “The best help, however,

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<sup>62</sup> *Fifth Annual Report of the National Consumers’ League*, 03/01/1904, pp. 21-22

<sup>63</sup> *Fourth Annual Report of the National Consumers’ League*, 03/04/1903, p. 8

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9

<sup>65</sup> See, for instance, “Brooklyn Auxiliary”, *The Work of the Consumers’ League of the City of New York, 1915*, p. 19;

<sup>66</sup> *Fourth Annual Report of the National Consumers’ League*, 03/04/1903, Reel 3, Slide 502

<sup>67</sup> For example, see the records of Florence Kelley’s travels at the end of the every annual report, which involve attendance of numerous meetings at Churches, religious institutions, and affiliated organizations.

which the ministers give takes the form of their sermons in the late spring on the duty of refraining from shopping on Saturday afternoons, and in the early fall on the duty of avoiding the Christmas crowds, and in general the duty of applying the Golden Rule to shopping.”<sup>68</sup>

Consequently, with respect to the NCL, the Christian reform sentiment compelled less than it impelled. To put it comparatively, whereas the Co-operative groups were steeped in the rhetoric of Christian socialism and reformism, the National Consumers' League was “forced” to align its goals with those of Christian reformist groups through the preferences and practices of Consumers' League members. This does not tell us everything about particular members' convictions and motivations. Many active officers and members, after all, such as John Graham Brooks were in fact committed Christians. Rather, this reveals the extent to which members of the NCL imagined their group as a non-affiliated, “secular” reform group. Florence Kelley touted that “the International Women's Christian Temperance Union and the International Organizations of the Garment Workers alike work constantly with the Consumers' League.”<sup>69</sup> The National Consumers' League, unlike the co-ops, did not fashion itself as a transformative movement. Consequently, they did not need to occasion a wholesale moral and social transformation; they could satisfy themselves with the more “modest” goal of refashioning consumers' behavior by educating the public. Thus, the National Consumers' League, the Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative

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<sup>68</sup> *Seventh Annual Report of the National Consumers' League*, 03/01/1906, p. 23

<sup>69</sup> *Second Annual Report of the National Consumers' League*, 03/06/1901, p. 12.

Guild were similarly motivated by Christian social reform movements, although in distinctive manners.

#### The Consumer's Mind

But one aspect of this alignment around Christian moral sentiment bears further scrutiny: activists' understanding of the consumer as a person. Each of these groups sought to reorganize the ways that consumers, as individuals, made decisions and to avert the disastrous psychological consequences of overwork, squalid and impoverished living conditions. On the one hand, dire working conditions for women and children, especially, resulted in physical deformities such as missing hands as well as emotional and physical exhaustion. On the other hand, working and living conditions could weaken intellectual resolve and psychological constitution—whether the minds of thoughtless middle-class consumers bombarded by advertisements or the “dissolute” tenement dweller. In their depictions of both consumers and the workers they sought to support, members of these groups reveal another dimension of consumer activists' social motives: a naturalist psychology. A naturalist psychology, stated briefly and inadequately, identifies the human mind as primarily determined or shaped by environmental factors, especially—in this case—social relations, stimuli such as advertising, and humanly built environments like tenements.

This kind of naturalism is on full display in fin de siècle novelists like Theodore Dreiser and George Gissing (Ledger and Luckhurst 2000:xvi) or journalists and writers like Teresa Billington Greig and Upton Sinclair. Dreiser articulates this naturalist position clearly in *Sister Carrie*, “Among the forces which sweep and play throughout the

universe, untutored man is but a wisp in the wind. Our civilization is still in a middle stage, scarcely beast, in that it is no longer wholly guided by instinct; scarcely human, in that it is not yet wholly guided by reason.” (Dreiser 56) The core of this naturalism lies in its “melodramatic vision of human beings at the mercy of forces over which they have little control but whose purpose is ultimately intelligible.” (Newlin 2011:15). The question of naturalist psychology as a motive force in shaping consumer activism is not independent of the earlier issues of ethics and capitalist social institutions. Rather, as James Livingston argues, literary naturalism and its distant philosophical cousin—pragmatism—helped to rethink the modern subject (or self) in an era of corporate capitalism, a surplus of consumer goods, and slowly rising purchasing power for even lower class (Livingston 1997:84-157). Furthermore, as Walcutt noted, “an orthodox Christian dualism...provides the framework within which naturalism reveal[ed] its intention and meaning.” (Walcutt 1956:18). We should then understand this naturalist psychology in conjunction with capitalist and Christian motives.

A classic account of literary naturalism divided it into two tendencies—one optimistic and bound up with “progressivism and social radicalism”, the other pessimistic and bound up with mechanistic accounts of human behavior (Walcutt 1956). As a transcendentalist “solution” to the dualism of spirit and nature, the ideal and the material, literary naturalism sought to dramatize and unify these opposing poles—often to locate the spirit of human freedom in deterministic environments, both social and “natural”. According to Walcutt, these optimistic and pessimistic streams entailed distinctive conclusions about the role that human knowledge—especially scientific knowledge—

could play in mitigating the abstract forces that determined human life. As one would expect, consumer activists fit within the optimistic camp. They believed that education and the exercise of human reason provided antidotes to social and environmental determination.

This psychological naturalism was on display in consumer activists' discussions of consumers as well as the 'distant' workers who were 'employed' by purchasers—one need not search far in their writings for evidence of such an understanding of mind. “Has it ever occurred to you”, one Women’s Co-operative Guild editorial asked, “that people’s characters and lives must be influenced by the kind of work they do?”<sup>70</sup> But there are more unambiguous tendencies toward such naturalistic understandings of mind. These are evident activists' characterization of human behavior. An editorial in the *Co-operative News* about shop windows began with the following assertion: “No one will doubt that shop windows possess a general educational tendency.” But what did this “educational tendency” consist in? It consisted in the clear, rational ordering and labeling of goods that would incite people to either buy or avoid them. Subsequently, the editors described the consequences of ill-kept shop windows: “An untidy store window is also...educational, repulsing the outsider[.]”<sup>71</sup> We can begin to see that the “educational tendency” slid into explicit assumptions about behavior. The perceiver would be “attracted” or “repelled” by shop windows. There are other examples strewn throughout

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<sup>70</sup> “Sham and Shoddy”, *Co-operative News*, 03/25/1911, p. 373

<sup>71</sup> “Educational Shop Windows”, *Co-operative News*, 12/20/1890.

the writings of NCL, CWS, and Women's Guild members that reference shop windows in particular.<sup>72</sup>

In addition, these activists' voiced similar concerns about advertising and its effects on consumers. Florence Kelley lamented the excessive visual stimulation to which consumers were subjected: "We are an eye-minded nation. We love shows and pictures of all kinds. We buy our food and clothes according to the shop window displays, or to pictures and legends painted on barns and hoardings, or printed on the covers of magazines...the multitude of thoughtless spenders are guided by their eyes."<sup>73</sup> Similarly, in denouncing the "materialism" of English life, one co-operator noted a "marked tendency to assume the indifference of the mere spectator, instead of the serious purpose of the reformer."<sup>74</sup> Whether denouncing the false economy of fashion or the mindless pursuit of cheapness for its own sake, activists were troubled by the effect of advertisements on consumers' behavior and reasoning.

Most centrally, we can observe this naturalist psychological attitude in the way that consumer activists discussed the causes and consequences of poverty, labor exploitation, and the industrial system. In discussing morality and the economy, one co-operator concluded: "We are almost helplessly involved in the huge machine of society, and our only chance lies, not in individual resistance, but in modifying the action of the

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<sup>72</sup> Florence Kelley, "Industrial Conditions as a Community Problem with Particular Reference to Child Labor", *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 103, Industrial Relations and the Churches (Sep., 1922), pp. 60-64; "Shop Window Rantin': A Popular Institution in Yorkshire Factory Circles", *Co-operative News*, 07/06/1912

<sup>73</sup> "Report of the Secretary", *NCL Annual Report 1914-1917*, pp. 20-21

<sup>74</sup> "The Materialism of English Life", *The Co-operative News*, 06/25/1904, p. 782

machine.”<sup>75</sup> This immediately recalls the NCL’s assertion that businesses were “virtually helpless” to address the sweating problem under the stress of competition.<sup>76</sup> John Graham Brooks of the NCL, for instance, wrote about the dire consequences of child labor in these terms: “the condition of modern industry, the pace that it takes, the routine character of it and the almost pitiless requirements are all against the child's one resource of learning the art of fellowship through play. The play instinct is crippled in mill and factory and mine.”<sup>77</sup> By honing in on the instincts, Brooks reveals the debilitating psychological consequences of child labor, which he goes on to suggest would ill-prepare children for the modern workforce. Florence Kelley gestured in this direction too, when writing about the “invasion” of family life by industrial production: “the whole family life is disorganized. At times the house is locked, the family on the streets, because the mother is fetching supplies to and from the factory. That is not an unusual case. That sort of manufacture, with the help of the invalid of the family, is not exceptional in any of our great manufacturing cities in which any industry is carried on whereof the material can be subdivided and made easily portable.”<sup>78</sup> Kelley’s use of “disorganized family life” invokes a whole range of concerns from urban decay, dissolute living, disease, and poverty. Furthermore, it signals a common era-specific obsession with progress and

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<sup>75</sup> “Morals of Political Economy”, *The Co-operative News*, 04/14/1888, p. 349

<sup>76</sup> “Constitution”, *National Consumers’ League Archives*

<sup>77</sup> “Past and Present Arguments against Child Labor”, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 27, Child Labor, Mar. 1906, p. 23

<sup>78</sup> “Invasion of Family Life by Industry”, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 34, No. 1, Jul., 1909, p. 91

advance analogous to the NCL's own embrace of the "well-ordered factory" in contrast with the "dingy, filth-ridden" tenement.<sup>79</sup>

But all hope was not lost. Even at their most deterministic, activists left room for the possibility that appropriate knowledge and mutual effort could reshape blind social forces. Thus, people were "almost helpless" or "virtually helpless." This emphasis on education rounds out consumer activists' optimistic naturalism. At a co-operative store opened in a poor Sunderland neighborhood, Women's Guild member Francis Jane reported that members had encouraged thirty-three girls to sign a pledge in which they the girls promised "never to take any intoxicating drink whatever."<sup>80</sup> Similar investments in temperance projects were a testament to both the determining power of social environments (e.g. access to drink) *and* the potential of a proper education—aided, of course, by consumer activists—to counteract the negative effects of social environments. It was not uncommon for members of the National Consumers' League, for instance, to be members of the Women's Christian Temperance Union.<sup>81</sup>

Owing to the acknowledged enormity of the task, these educational projects were legion among consumer activists. An early National Consumers' League pamphlet asked, "Will you help form an intelligent public opinion as to the responsibilities of consumers?"<sup>82</sup> The League members always portrayed their campaigns as ultimately educational. After all, one can only form a "strongly organized body of public opinion"

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<sup>79</sup> See, for example, "Protection for Women", *Buffalo Express*, 09/30/1901, "Response", Maud Nathan, *Twenty-Five Years of the Consumers' League of the City of New York*, pp. 28-29

<sup>80</sup> "Essay on New Year's Day", Women's Co-operative Guild Settlement Papers, LSE Library [microfilm], Vol. 4, Reel 3, slide 513.

<sup>81</sup> *Second Annual Report of the National Consumers' League*, p. 15.

<sup>82</sup> Records of the National Consumers' League [microfilm], Reel 4, Slide 375, no date.

through educational projects and campaigns.<sup>83</sup> Co-operators were similarly obsessed with their educational role. One recurring insert on the educational role of co-operators was entitled “The Hills of Vision, Educational Programme, 1914-15: Spreading the Light.” They glossed their purpose with purple, allusive prose: “The Hills of Vision are brought with the light of the day that is dawning. To bring in the glory of the things that shall be is our endeavor. That is our purpose and who shall hinder the doing thereof?”<sup>84</sup> Co-operative meetings, much like those of the National Consumers’ League involved lectures about social and practical issues of the day, as well as practical strategizing and general education. As one co-operator argued, “Co-operation cannot be expected to take hold of people who do not understand its objects, who are uninformed of its history and work, who care not for their brother’s, and know not in what consists their own; therefore one of the objects of every [co-operative] society – as of the first- should be education, every society, whether small or great, should support an educational committee.”<sup>85</sup> The Women’s Co-operative Guild always included educational work in their weekly and monthly programs, as well as their overall mission: “education and action for common definite ends in Co-operation and Citizenship have gone side by side.”<sup>86</sup>

As we have seen, activists were notably obsessed with consumers’ ignorance of their “responsibilities.” But in keeping with this naturalist temper, the reason for this ignorance was not attributable to individual failures alone. Rather, ignorance derived primarily from the conditions of life in capitalist societies. In fact, activists noted that

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<sup>83</sup> “Secretary’s Report”, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, p. 26.

<sup>84</sup> *Co-operative News*, 07/04/1914, p. 853.

<sup>85</sup> “Education and Social Progress”, P. Briggs, *Co-operative News*, 1895.

<sup>86</sup> Twenty-Eighth Annual Report of the Women’s Co-operative Guild, May 1910-11, p. 3.

these conditions of life obscured and mystified the forces that acted on others.<sup>87</sup> NCL member Maud Nathan described the “complicated industrial system” as a “responsive and fluid organism.” It was a “mysterious power that expands and contracts our sleeves, that arrays us one year in shining mohair and another in clinging cashmere.”<sup>88</sup> Analogously, the editors of the Co-operative news pointed to the mysterious character of industrial capitalist societies, “It is much easier to shut one’s eyes to the disagreeable things of life. The price is tempting, so why seek to lift the veil?”<sup>89</sup> Consumers were encouraged to be ignorant by virtue of the environment of producing and selling in which they lived. Co-operative members called on natural metaphors to drive this point home: “It will be seen that all the elements of revolt are in the air, and as even the worm will turn so we may wake up some morning to find that the atmosphere created by the rise in the cost of living has become intolerable to the great mass of wage-earners.” This “shift in atmosphere” was to result in a revolt of working-class consumers, pushed to the breaking point by exploitative advertisers, middle-men, and wealthy capitalist profiteers. Unless exposed to the public light of reason by steadfast, committed activists, the environmental conditions threatened to buffet individuals against their will or work behind their backs. With activists’ help, people could recognize these forces as susceptible to human planning and action—the concerted actions of “individuals multiplied by hundreds and thousands”.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> For an elaborate account of this problem in relation to commodities, see the previous chapter.

<sup>88</sup> Report of the Executive Committee [at Public Meeting called to form a Consumers’ League], 02/02/1898, Reel 16, Slide 71, 72

<sup>89</sup> “The Craze for Cheapness”, *Co-operative News*, 07/27/1907, Reel 6 (Tuckwell Papers), 225/5

<sup>90</sup> Report of the Executive Committee, 02/02/1898, Reel 16, Slide 72

Consumer activists' brand of optimistic psychological naturalism ensured that they could maintain their faith in the collective action of reasoning individuals to counteract, deflect, or guide blind social (and natural) forces. It shaped the way that consumer activists persisted in their appeals to consumers and possibility of education to bring about righteous or responsible consumption. When consumer activists' lamented "poor" or "ignorant" consumers, they did so with the conviction that the situation was dire but not hopeless. Rather, they believed in the transforming power of education and knowledge, which could make possible concerted, ethical collective action.

Why Consumers and not others?

Activists' accounts of consumers and their complicity in pressing social problems suggest three inter-related motives for and in their work: capitalist institutions, Christian social reform movements, and optimistic psychological naturalism. Their interpretations of social phenomena reveal imperatives to mobilize people as consumers. If activists interpreted the public in light of expanding markets; if they were concerned to counter the influence of competition and intensified marketing; if they saw the anonymity of mass-produced consumer goods as a problem, they perceived these distinctively capitalist phenomena as imperatives to focus on and mobilize consumers. Moreover, these interpretations justified that ongoing work. Similarly, if they appealed to a Christian sense of duty in economic life, they offered both imperatives and justifications for insisting on consumption as ethical action. Finally, if they interpreted people as subject to social forces that could only be countered with sufficient knowledge and co-operation, activists were impelled and justified in pursuing robust programs of education. This is

what it means to claim capitalism, Christian reformist morality, and psychological naturalism as motives.

But these motives would have been relevant to many in the United States and England during this time. Consequently, I mention three points that help clarify how and why these motives mattered to consumer activists. First, we must recall the significance of activists' interpretations of social phenomena as the basis for this account of motive. While others may have perceived similar phenomena, they need not have interpreted these phenomena similarly. While this may seem self-evident, the attempt to explain when particular interpretations become relevant is a recurring problem in sociological theories of action (Vaisey 2008; Silver 2011; Reed 2011; Swidler 1986). I build toward a more general account of how activists' group-specific character and interpretations become relevant over the next several chapters. Second, these motives help explain why turn-of-the-twentieth century activists shared repertoires of action in spite of their distinctive contexts and characteristics. But I do not claim that they account fully for activists' decision to focus on the consumer in the first place. Third, to account for the origins of their activism, I must explain why activists' interpreted these social phenomena through the lens of the consumer.<sup>91</sup> Why focus on the consumer at all? Fortunately, we can synthesize existing historical accounts of these groups' origins to address this question—even if only provisionally and in general terms.

Perhaps the most obvious and most general reasons that these activists focused on the consumer are transformations in industrial capitalism. In the last half of the nineteenth

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<sup>91</sup> One could just as easily rewrite this statement in more abstract terms to provide a template for analyses of other kinds of activism or self-consciously future-oriented action. I preserve the language relevant to my case to avoid needless confusion.

century, there was a well-documented trend toward large-scale industrial and machine production (Joyce 1980; Wright 1990; Rodgers 1978). Such industrial transformations had the very important consequence of expanding access to mass produced consumer goods. In England, for instance, prices for many goods fell by about 40 percent from the mid-1870s and the mid-1890s (Pugh 1999:122-23). Moreover, the trend to machine production increased the capital required to initiate production. Thus, for the working-classes, amalgamation in the sphere of consumption would have been a reasonable alternative (Gurney 1996:17-18). The United States experienced an analogous period of declining prices and increases in real wages, particularly in urban areas (Blaszczk 2009:20; Schneirov 2006:207-208). Laborers were very susceptible to the late nineteenth century boom and bust cycle, thus they experienced these benefits in fits and starts. But they too began to leverage their role as consumers through demands for a “living wage.” (Glickman 1997) Consequently, we have good reason to claim that transformations in industrial capitalism rendered the consumer increasingly relevant and perceptible. Under these conditions, the consumer would have seemed like a plausible, new basis from which to transform social life.

In addition to these industrial transformations, we can also consider other paths to politics, or more appropriately the lack thereof. The lack of access to politics can necessitate a search for other opportunities to bring about social change or participate in public life (Clemens 1997; Rappaport 2001). As women’s groups, members of the National Consumers’ League and the Women’s Co-operative Guild confronted relatively restricted opportunities to participate in public life. Most notably, women in England and

the United States did not win the unrestricted right to vote until the 1920s (1920 in the U.S. and 1928 in England). But in late Victorian England, politics would have been predominantly a spectator sport for working class men, even if they were taken with William Gladstone or other Liberal politicians (Pelling 1968; Powell 1992). Moreover, Gareth Stedman Jones argued that the late Victorian Era witnessed the emergence of a working class culture defined in part by political apathy (1974). Thus for prospective participants in co-operative societies, various trade unions would have been a more plausible course for participating in public life and politics than formal politics. Consequently, a more complete account would require a detailed investigation of why and how active Co-operative men in particular were drawn into consumer politics rather than trade union politics. But I only want to suggest that the consumer would not have appeared plausible only because of increased visibility, but also because of insufficient access to or interest in other forms of politics.

In the context of increasing social and economic prominence for the consumer and relatively limited access to other kinds of political engagement, the consumer surfaced as ready to hand tool for social transformation. Within the crucible of expanding capitalist markets, Christian attempts to moralize economic life, and naturalist psychologies, these activists understandably converged around a shared repertoire of action. But as I have noted above, shared motives and repertoires of action need not result in similar actions—especially for groups as differently situated as the National Consumers' League, the Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative Guild. To appreciate how this played out, I turn next to conflicts between these activists,

businessmen, and trade unions. A look into these conflicts can help us appreciate when and how activists' modified and reshaped these repertoires of ethical consumer action in light of their gender, class, and national backgrounds.

## Chapter 4 – Character in Conflict: At Odds with Labor and Business

In their efforts to stand above class-conflict and partisanship, activists' visions of ethical consumption led them to clash with organized labor and businessmen. The Co-operative Wholesale Society suffered periodic boycotts on the behalf of [non-co-operative] merchants *and* struggled with calls by unions to prioritize union labor in co-operative factories. The Co-operative Women's Guild, for instance, actively sought to unionize some co-operative workers, much to the chagrin of the Co-operative Wholesale Society, while they had no love lost for the [non-co-operative] store owners either. The National Consumers' League had to quell periodic labor and business discontent with the League's policies and positions; the former were distressed at NCL campaigns that impinged on labor's "territory" and the latter were unsettled by the lines the NCL drew between "moral" and "immoral" businesses.

On the surface, these analogous conflicts with labor and business interests appear to indicate another basic similarity between these groups. Activists' converged upon a consumerist repertoire of action—one that trumpeted the consumer as a solution to the partisan struggles of the age—this same consumerist repertoire engendered partisan conflicts that accentuated divergent group characteristics. They envisioned the consumer as universal, powerful, and responsible. As I have already shown, when they appealed to people as consumers in their efforts to unmask the commodity form, activists developed similar strategies and revealed similar motivations.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ch. 3, "Consumer Senses and Commodity Fetishism" and Ch. 4, "The Motives of Consumer Activists"

However, when they clashed with labor and business, the National Consumers' League, Co-operative Wholesale Society, and Women's Co-operative diverged in their actions along the lines of class, gender, nation, and organizational form. In these conflicts, we can trace how activists' clashes with competing audiences brought their class, gender, and national characteristics as well as organizational form into much starker relief. The universal consumer often became the national or local consumer. These characteristics became cues for action through the mundane conflicts and clashes that arose in the course of their activism. For this reason, it would not be appropriate to assume, for example, that distinctive national cultures of consumption provided consistent cues for action without specifying how and when these national cultures actually mattered across a range of contexts. Consumer activists were forced to justify their focus on consumer in response to challenges offered by labor and business. And when they articulated these claims explicitly, British co-operators, in particular, pursued distinctively British courses of action. In short, the British consumer activists sometimes drew upon a nationally-specific culture of consumption—that of Free Trade—to meet the challenges offered by business antagonists. By narrowing their claims about the consumer, they sought to justify their approach to a skeptical audience and to enlist the nation in defense of the co-operative movement. This differs from the more public, identity-setting agenda in which they defined and explained their vision of the universal ethical consumer.

These differences were not merely rhetorical. They expressed actual differences in the policies that consumer activists pursued. Trumpeting their class and national

identities, the C.W.S. remained steadfast in their clashes with labor; in key instances, they pursued policies that stressed their fundamental differences from trade unions. By contrast, the Women's Guild was more likely to re-emphasize their similarity to trade unions through their policies and rhetoric. This difference was bound up with their gender-specific efforts to secure unions for Co-operative shop assistants, many of whom were women. Yet the Guild's conflicts with business led them to announce their British commitment to Free Trade just like their brethren in the C.W.S. Finally, the National Consumers' League shifted the course of their activism by abandoning the clothing label that formed the core of their consumer activism after coming into repeated conflicts with labor. These conflicts occurred in the shadow of the notable class differences between the N.C.L. and members of the American labor movement. But in virtue of their organizational character and class background, the N.C.L. depended on both the labor movement *and* manufacturers to sustain their activism. Thus, while the Co-operators qualified their "universal" appeals to consumers in response to clashes with labor and business, the N.C.L. sustained a nonpartisan, "universal" appeal.

My comparison in this chapter proceeds in parts, examining how the C.W.S., the Women's Guild, and the National Consumers' League dealt with labor and business conflicts. Within each of these sections, I address specific labor and business conflicts. This makes it possible for me to compare *both* the differences in how these groups responded to labor and business and differences between the groups. For instance, the National Consumers' League, while sympathetic to labor, was able to steer a publicly neutral course between business and labor. In contrast, the C.W.S. and the Women's

Guild clearly identified as working class laborers and pursued visible policies that made announced this working class identification. These paired and embedded comparisons make it possible to explore the reasons why activists' diverged from shared repertoire of the ethical consumer. Therefore, activists' practical conflicts with business and labor provide a window into the process through which the balance of motives shifted from their engagement with central features of capitalist societies to group-specific qualities and back.

The Co-operatives: a) Labor and the Co-operative Wholesale Society

The Co-operatives were an organization of working-class consumers, first and foremost. Percy Redfern articulated this widely shared understanding with exceptional subtlety. The first economic principle of co-operatives was one of "mutual effort", where the "good of one" becomes consonant with the "good of all." Besides this economic principle, however, early co-operators [the Rochdale Pioneers, who figured prominently in co-operative mythology] "held to the older ideal of the control of industry by the working class."<sup>2</sup> This emphasis on the working class became a platitude in co-operative discussions, as arguments arose about how best to shoulder the interests of the working classes.<sup>3</sup> As a group of consumers, but especially as working-class consumers, co-operatives were forced to straddle the line between the universalism of the "consumer" and their stated identity as a working-class group. Consequently, the debate would surface periodically among co-operators as to the appropriate balance to strike between the interests of consumers and workers. In 1911, one society president argued that the

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<sup>2</sup> *The Story of the C.W.S. 1863-1913*, pp. iii-iv

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g. "Labour and Consumption", *Co-operative News*, 10/01/1892, pp. 1100-1102; "The Claims of Labour and Consumption", Letters to the Editor, *Co-operative News*, 07/02/1892, p. 683

[co-operative] movement has “become too much the slave of the consumer” and had, consequently, “lost sight of the producer.” He concluded, dramatically, “Dividend is the consumers’ god. If the C.W.S. has to raise the price of their goods in order to pay the women’s minimum scale, it will handicap all societies that have fallen to the curse of the big dividend.”<sup>4</sup>

However, there was a second source of tensions embedded in the co-operators complicated role as working class consumers and businesspeople. Co-operative life was organized around the store, where members could receive accumulated dividends on purchases made. But in addition to the co-operative store, co-operatives were involved in the manufacture of goods, from boots to tea, many of which were sold in co-operative stores. Consequently, as both owners and consumers, the co-operators needed to balance their desire to turn a profit and please consumers with their desire to give labor a fair deal. Sometimes the issue was as “simple” as boots of unknown provenance, neither trade union nor co-operative made, appearing in co-operative stores. In response to one such incident, a member of the Women’s Co-operative Guild sided explicitly with labor, as they often did: “Trade unionism stands for industrial order against foolish and fatal competition, self help, mutual help, the constant raising of the standards of leisure and of education—all objects dear to co-operators, are the work of unions.”<sup>5</sup> But in that same issue, one member of a co-operative society identified unions as unnecessary and possibly counterproductive to “ideal co-operation”: “Under ideal co-operation, trade

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<sup>4</sup> “The Consumers’ God”, *Co-operative News*, 01/11/1913, pp. 40-41; The “big dividend” refers here to the rate received by co-operative members for purchasing their goods at the store, while the reference to the women’s minimum scale refers to a recent decision to pay women workers at co-operative stores a minimum wage.

<sup>5</sup> “Trade Unionism and Co-operation”, *Co-operative News*, 09/30/1911, p. 1258

unions can have no useful place, and the most effective way I can conceive of the trade unionists bringing about the conditions they desire is for trade unionists to become co-operators.”<sup>6</sup> These conflicting statements indicate the range of supportive and skeptical attitudes toward trade unions between individual co-operators. But this flags another important fault line between co-operative groups, which will become more evident: the line between members of Co-operative Wholesale Society, mostly men, and the women in the Women’s Co-operative Guild. The latter tended to voice unambiguous support for trade unions, while the former were more circumspect with their sympathies.

The co-operatives were awkwardly positioned between member organizations like the W.C.G. and the C.W.S., trade unions, as well as their institutional roles as salespeople *and* consumers. These tensions were no more evident than when conflicts flared up between the co-operative groups and labor unions. One such conflict occurred between the Co-operatives and the British trade unions, particularly the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operators. In 1911, the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operators (NUBSO) were planning on introducing a trade union label to adorn boots made under trade union conditions and standards. NUBSO was in communication with Co-operative members about this issue as far back as 1907. At that time, a NUBSO representative to the Co-operative Congress—a quarterly meeting with representatives from Co-operative groups such as the Co-operative Wholesale Society and Co-operative Industries/Productions, among others—sent two resolutions for co-operative consideration: 1) asking for a pledge that “only firms recognised as ‘fair’ by the Trade Unions affected shall be patronised by

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<sup>6</sup> “The C.W.S. and the Trade Union Label”, George Quirk, *Co-operative News*, 09/30/1911, p. 1253.

the co-operative societies in question” and 2) “the adoption by trade societies of a label to indicate to the public that the articles produced are made by Trade Unionists will tend to diminish the manufacture of sweated and non-union goods.”<sup>7</sup> In the ensuing discussion, one co-operator, Mr. J Argyll, raised what was to be the intractable question: “He had found the greatest difficulty had been to get the opinion of trade unionists as to what were really ‘fair’ shops.”<sup>8</sup> In addition to wage and cleanliness standards, trade unions understood a ‘fair’ shop to mean a closed union shop, open only to workers who were a part of the union, in this case the Boot and Shoe Operators.

But co-operators, at least those in the C.W.S. and Co-operative Productions, blanched at this requirement for two reasons. First, co-operators desired that the Co-operative brand be a sufficient marker of both quality and fairness. Many reasoned that the Co-operative brand already signaled both qualities. Caving to the demands of the Boot and Shoe operators would be a tacit admission that the brand did not indicate quality and fairness. As one rank and file trade unionist and co-operator stated, “[he] was quite satisfied with the label of the C.W.S. They paid the standard rate of wages and more. It ought to be sufficient for every man or woman in the society.”<sup>9</sup> Co-operative advertisements, as I have previously noted, stressed the quality of C.W.S. goods, while also often highlighting the virtuous nature of co-operative production.<sup>10</sup> Many committed co-operators thought that a trade union label would ‘pollute’ the C.W.S. brand, which

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<sup>7</sup> *Report of the Trade Unions Congress*, September 1907, pp. 126-7

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127

<sup>9</sup> “C.W.S. vs. Label”, *Co-operative News*, 09/23/1911, p. 1211

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g. Ads regarding co-operative clothing, “Produced...under the Best Conditions of Labour.” *Co-operative News*, 01/22/1916, p. x; “All Women Should Vote”, *Bolton Co-operative Record*, March 1908

should have been a guarantee of quality and fairness. Whether co-operative productions were as consistently pristine as advertised was another question entirely.<sup>11</sup>

Second, co-operators were not always convinced of the value of a closed union shop. In this, the Co-operators quintessentially British commitment to voluntarism and Free Trade reveals itself. The chairman of the C.W.S., James Shillito, reported that “[the C.W.S.] would have to agree to employ only trade union labour, and they could not see their way to give such an undertaking.”<sup>12</sup> The antagonism of C.W.S. members to a closed shop seems to have its basis in the co-operative’s affirmation of consumers as the ideal remedy to the exploitation of labor by capital, as well as their unwillingness to “coerce” the workers in co-operative factories to joining labor unions. After a call from the editors of the *Co-operative News* to describe the communications between NUBSO and the C.W.S. on this matter, Shillito argued, “The Wholesale could not be tyrants; they must allow their employees to use their discretion with regard to their joining a union.”<sup>13</sup> In response to a contemporaneous increase in food prices, one co-operator interpreted the situation as a result of greedy private producers: “No doubt, as a result of labour upheavals, the profits of these men will be increased, whilst the workermen’s gains will be snatched from him in increased prices of food, clothing, and shelter.”<sup>14</sup> The author of this report rendered the position of the laborer as ultimately impotent, even when acting collectively. He continued, “The consumer pays the piper...Of course, that is the

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<sup>11</sup> See, e.g. these discussions of exploitation and products of ‘sweated’ provenance ending up in co-operative stores, reported in the *Co-operative News*: “The Taint of the Sweater”, Ed. *Co-operative News*, 05/26/06, p. 583; “No Sweating in Co-operation,” G.H. Holyoake, *Co-operative News*, 02/25/1893, p. 183

<sup>12</sup> “C.W.S. vs. Label”, *Co-operative News*, 09/23/1911, p. 1212

<sup>13</sup> “About the Label”, *Co-operative News*, 09/16/1911, p. 1192

<sup>14</sup> “Problems for Co-operators: How Consumers are Becoming the Slaves of Private Producers”, *Co-operative News*, 09/23/1911, p. 1216

consumer's own look out. He has the remedy in his own hands by means of co-operation."<sup>15</sup> Therefore, consumer co-operation and not worker's co-operation (collective ownership by workers) was the only certain way to protect the gains achieved by workers, ironically. Of course, there were further and more elaborate justifications for this tendency to privilege consumers over and against producers. Sometimes co-operators decried a "bonus" paid to labor as taken from the consumer's pocket, especially with respect to the issue of worker's versus consumer's co-operation.<sup>16</sup> The Women's Co-operative Guild, too, with their image of the women with the basket, identified consumption as "the greatest of all earthly powers."<sup>17</sup>

Consequently, there was much consternation in the co-operative camp when, in 1911, the Trade Unions left co-operative boot and shoe manufacturers off of their list of manufactures receiving the label. In the midst of a healthy debate in the *Co-operative News*, E.L. Poulton, the General Secretary of NUBSO wrote a letter describing the negotiation process between the union and co-operatives, which dated to 1909. He wrote that co-operative leadership stated that "they had every sympathy with the objects, [but] they could not adopt the stamp because it would mean they must employ only trade unionists, which would mean 'interference' with 'individual liberty.'"<sup>18</sup> Although the record of communication between NUBSO and the C.W.S. on this issue extends back to 1907, the NUBSO Monthly Reports confirm that the Boot and Shoe Operators did

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> "Can Co-operation Solve the Social Problem?", *Co-operative News*, 05/27/1905, p. 638

<sup>17</sup> "The Woman with the Basket", Women's Corner, *Co-operative News*,

<sup>18</sup> "C.W.S. and the Trade Union Label: Letters", *Co-operative News*, 09/23/1911, p. 1225

receive a delegation from the Co-operatives addressing this issue in September 1909.<sup>19</sup> Although cordial, these negotiations never resolved the basic issues of the Co-operative brand and the closed shop. As a result, the co-operatives did not receive the union label (or stamp) on their boots, much to the chagrin of both co-operators and trade unionists.

This intractable difference between the Boot and Shoe Operators and the Co-operative Wholesale Society induced a serious reconsideration of Co-operative goals and purposes. As representatives of the working classes, what did it mean to co-operators that trade unionists did not officially “approve” of co-operative productions? Co-operators were not shy about their ostensive support of trade unions and the working classes. As the flurry of correspondence generated by this conflict shows, some rank and file co-operators were also trade unionists.<sup>20</sup> In the end, neither this shared membership, nor this class-based sympathy disturbed co-operators’ commitments to the co-operative brand and the individual freedoms of workers.<sup>21</sup> Co-operators’ ongoing discussion with the Boot and Shoe Operators resulted in a disappointing denouement. While they affirmed their class identity as a group devoted to transforming society through the collective organization of [working-class] consumers, they were not “recognized” by NUBSO as a trade union-approved employer.

In their conflicts with the Boot and Shoe Operators, the C.W.S. and their compatriots in the Women’s Co-operative Guild affirmed the class identity of the co-

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<sup>19</sup> *National Union of Boot and Shoe Operators Monthly Report*, October 1909, pp. 447-48.

<sup>20</sup> “C.W.S. v. Label”, *Co-operative News*, 09/23/1911, p. 1211; *Joint Committee Meetings for Trade Unionists and Co-operators*, A.H. Gill and James Johnston, p. 135.

<sup>21</sup> I will clarify this question of workers’ individual freedoms further clarification when I discussed co-operative conflicts with businessmen below. But as I mentioned earlier, this issue is related to the culture of Free Trade in England.

operatives. At the same time, they also affirmed their status as a consumers' co-operative, in so far as they pursued their principles in opposition to the wishes as the trade unionists. But in simultaneously affirming their class and consumer identities, the co-operators qualified their claims to consumer universality. Co-operation was essentially a movement for and of the working classes.

#### b) Co-operative Labor and the Women's Guild

But clashes with labor did not just elicit co-operators to identify as working-class consumers. These clashes also raised the salience of gender to the policies and practices of both the Women's Guild and the C.W.S. The Women's Guild and the C.W.S. butted heads over the unionization of employees at Co-operative stores. The Amalgamated Union of Co-operative Employees (AUCE), formed in 1895, sought to convince co-operative employees of all stripes to organize, although they encountered resistance from many local co-operative leaders and members. One group from whom AUCE found consistent support was the Women's Co-operative Guild, who was more than willing to challenge C.W.S. leadership. While the C.W.S. negotiated with the Boot and Shoe Operators (NUBSO), they were also in consistent discussions with the AUCE to discuss the union's continued advance into co-operative ventures.<sup>22</sup> An 1893 account of Women's Guild meetings, just prior to the formation of the AUCE, reveals the Guild's unapologetic and unambiguous support for trade unions: "It will be remembered that we gave an account in our last report of the two series of conferences that the guild arranged in order to promote the alliance of the co-operative and trade unionist movement[.]"<sup>23</sup> In

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<sup>22</sup> "Trade Unionism and Co-operation", *Co-operative News*, 09/30/1911, p. 1262

<sup>23</sup> *Tenth Annual Report of the Women's Co-operative Guild*, April 1893, p. 18.

subsequent years, the Guild voiced their support of laborers within the co-operative movement more forcefully, especially for women. Thus, while the Co-operative Wholesale Society sparred with the Boot and Shoe Operators, they also fielded analogous issues of unionization from co-operative employees (AUCE) with the support of the Women's Guild.

Before I delve into the Guild's support of AUCE, however, I want to briefly recount the relationship between the C.W.S. and the Women's Guild. The Women's Co-operative Guild formed in 1883 in order to explicitly raise the issue of women's role in co-operative projects. At the time, many local co-operative societies did not permit women to join as principal members. Women could shop at stores, but they would do so in the name of their spouses. In rare instances, individual women were able to be members of co-operatives under their own names. This policy continued in some local co-operatives through the first couple of decades of the twentieth century, despite the active resistance of Women's Guild members. The Guild's opposition to the present role for women in the co-operative movement, coupled with their unwavering support for co-operative ideals, resulted in a distinctive profile for women's guild agitation. As Guild members described it, they had two central aims: (1) encouraging women to take administrative roles within the co-operative movement; (2) addressing (a) direct issues within the movement/co-operative organizations such as educating co-operators as to their duties and (b) indirect<sup>24</sup> issues, "by helping to raise the whole status of working

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<sup>24</sup>"Indirect" refers here to work not immediately within and for the co-operative movement. So these forms of activism were indirect in relation to these women's support of co-operation. But they also recognized, obviously, that social and political reform would entail consequences for the co-operative movement.

women by means of combination, municipal activity, and legal protection.”<sup>25</sup> This seemingly innocuous statement exposes a basic organizational difference between the Guild and the C.W.S.: whereas the C.W.S. and other co-operative groups were non-political entities (i.e. they refrained from engaging in electoral politics until 1917), the Guild worked actively to bring about women’s suffrage and took “political” stands that threatened the “independence” of the Co-operatives. Thus, “combination” encompasses both trade unionism and consumer’s co-operation, while “municipal activity” and “legal protection” indicates a wide berth for openly political activism, from women’s suffrage to minimum wages for workers.<sup>26</sup> Finally, the Guild’s concern with the status of working women, in particular, indicates where their special charge to aid women could become antagonistic when these issues cropped up in the co-operative movement.<sup>27</sup>

Many co-operative employees, that is, those who worked in the store and in the factories, were women. The Guild spearheaded campaigns to ensure a minimum wage for women workers, with limited success. Years prior to the official minimum wage campaign, the Guild took an interest in women’s employment in the co-operative movement. They published papers about the status of working women in co-operative

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<sup>25</sup> *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Women’s Co-operative Guild*, April 1895-96, pp.3-4

<sup>26</sup> The Women’s Co-operative Guild received some funding from the Co-operative Wholesale Society. In the years from 1910 on, Guild members were involved in Divorce Law reform, which would have lowered the standards of proof of adultery, cruelty, rape and other charges for women who sought a divorce. Owing to pressure from Catholic groups, co-operators were hesitant to support, even indirectly, divorce law reform. Thus, the Co-operative Congress, which included the C.W.S., withdrew their grant to the Women’s Guild in 1914. See *32<sup>nd</sup> Annual Report of the Women’s Co-operative Guild*, May 1914-15, p. 1

<sup>27</sup> While I focus on the status of women because this was an explicit issue for the Women’s Guild, it is important to recall that these conflicts also elicit a distinctively masculine identity and response from the C.W.S. These gender dynamics were encoded into organization of co-operative life. This makes their convergence upon a tenuously shared repertoire of action all the more remarkable. On this, see Barbara Blaszak (2000).

enterprises and in employment more generally.<sup>28</sup> In 1908, the Guild sent a petition to the C.W.S. publicizing members' desires to obtain "equal pay for equal work" in C.W.S. factories.<sup>29</sup> This reveals the extent to which the Guild became involved in AUCE campaigns to extend the minimum wage standard to women. As M.C. Spooner reported in an educational paper about the Co-operative Store reported: "Twenty-four shillings per week for a man over twenty-one years is the minimum wage adopted by the Amalgamated Union of Co-operative Employees, and already many of the societies have agreed to this minimum rate; 'but', as the secretary of the Union significantly remarks, 'women are not included in our minimum wage.'"<sup>30</sup> Spooner notes, further, that "it is the distinct duty of every store member to ascertain what wages are being paid by the [local] society."<sup>31</sup> This pamphlet enumerates several important duties of Guild members, namely agitating for co-operatives and the AUCE to adopt this wage scale, particularly owing to the limited protections that were explicitly offered to women. In 1906, the Guild approached the AUCE with a petition to extend the minimum wage to women.<sup>32</sup> By 1909, as the CWS found themselves in negotiation with the Boot and Shoe operators, the Women's Guild had mounted a campaign with the AUCE in support of a minimum wage for working women in co-operatives. In fact, they described this minimum wage campaign with AUCE as "perhaps the most important and far-reaching agitation which

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<sup>28</sup> "Employment of Women in Shops", *Co-operative News*, 09/08/1894, p. 1030; "The Present Position of Working Women as Co-operators and Citizens", *Co-operative News*, Miss R.E. Brown, pp. 702-03

<sup>29</sup> *Twenty-sixth Annual Report of the Women's Co-operative Guild*, May 1908-09, p. 5

<sup>30</sup> *The Co-operative Store: Committees, Members, and Employes*, Paper I, *Women's Co-operative Guild*, n.d., p. 10

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Twenty-fourth Annual Report of the Women's Co-operative Guild*, May 1906-07, p. 13.

the Guild has undertaken.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, the Guild members sought to prod the hesitant C.W.S. to adopt standards in advance of the going wage rate and standard industry practices, particularly when it came to women.

Several years later, when the Guild and the AUCE convinced the co-operatives to adopt a minimum wage for more of their women workers, Guild representatives were proud of their unapologetic support for trade union “principles and practices.”<sup>34</sup> In addition to this agitation with and through the union, the Guild members consistently supported trade unions in other ways, from advocating trade union goods and labels to joint political and municipal agitation. Consequently, while Guild members were committed to the role of consumer co-operation in transforming social life, as evident in their image of the “woman with the basket,” they were much less concerned about remaining ideologically committed to the consumer when it came to working with trade unions. Guild members proudly declared their support of trade unionism, for instance, in the year that the CWS adopted a minimum wage for women: “The Guild has shown its...desire for a working alliance between the two movements [co-operation and trade unionism] in various other ways—e.g. in carrying on propaganda among trade unionists and their wives, in subscribing to the Dublin strike, and in welcoming the wives of the South African trade unionist exiles. We have endorsed the national policy of the AUCE, as regards wages, hours, *and employment of trade unionists only*[.]”<sup>35</sup> [italics added] Importantly, the Guild affirmed the very principle that the C.W.S. perceived as a sticking point in their negotiations with the boot and shop operators: the closed shop. Even prior

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<sup>33</sup> *Twenty-seventh Annual Report of the Women’s Co-operative Guild*, May 1909-10, p. 1

<sup>34</sup> *Thirty-first Annual Report of the Women’s Co-operative Guild*, May 1913-14., p. 4

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4

to this full-fledged endorsement of trade unionist principles, the Guild was more than willing to support trade union goods and trade union campaigns. For instance, in the midst of the conflict with the boot and shoe operators, the Guild members offered a full-throated support of trade unionism, "...because our movement is becoming such a huge commercial success, more than ever we are convinced that the workers should combine in their own interests."<sup>36</sup> In the same article, after acknowledging that nothing but the values of co-operators prevents a "society of sweaters" from taking hold, one Guild member asked, "Then how are we to know...that no one suffers?...If our minds are to be easy, we must know that the just and well-considered demands of the employed themselves are satisfied...And the label...seems a convenient short cut to the union's opinion."<sup>37</sup>

Thus, the conflicts with labor reveal several practical "deviations" from their repertoire of the ethical consumer. In general, when the co-operatives sparred with labor, they minimized their differences by emphasizing their shared class identity. When they did this, however, they also acted much more like a group of working class consumers than universal ones. But we can see further differences once we examine the Women's Co-operative Guild in relation to the C.W.S. and trade unionism. In the crucible of co-operative gender dynamics, the Guild members took it upon themselves to agitate for change as *working-class* women within the co-operative movement of consumers. Conflicts with labor resulted in a more thorough identification between co-operative

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<sup>36</sup> "Trade Unionism and Co-operation", *Co-operative News*, Women's Corner, 10/07/1911, p. 1258

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

women and trade unionists, while members of the C.W.S. accentuated their identification as working-class *consumers*.

c) Un-British Boycotts

Another wrinkle arises when we consider co-operators encountered resistance from the business community, with whom co-operators were far less sympathetic. In spite of their conflicts, labor was a natural ally for co-operators. Businessmen were another story entirely. Co-operators impugned them as harbingers of a competitive, individualistic society opposed to the mutualistic vision of co-operation. In particular, co-operators directed their ire toward middlemen—shop owners who were not in the co-operative fold and leeches off of labor while exploiting consumers. Consumers needed to pool their resources in order to cut out the middleman, which was precisely where co-operatives claimed their origins. In the middle of the nineteenth-century, the Rochdale Pioneers, whom co-operators identified as their forebears, sought to create an outlet for working class men to procure goods more cheaply by combining their resources. Thus, the middleman was long an antagonist to the co-operative project.<sup>38</sup> But aside from mere disdain or suspicion in co-operative rhetoric, middlemen sometimes rose up to defend themselves against co-operators by using a common consumerist strategy: the boycott. When faced with a boycott at the hands of local businessmen, co-operators—both the C.W.S. and the Women’s Guild—were unified in vociferous opposition. Rather than

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<sup>38</sup> For instance, co-operators could reject booksellers as middlemen, or any other traders who “merely” bought and sold goods. See the February 17, 1883 issue of the *Co-operative News*, p. 139. Co-operation entailed shared ownership and therefore, at least in theory, less dependence on the profit motive because all profits were to be redistributed to members in the form of a dividend. Sometimes, co-operators compared the middleman to other morally suspect characters like the gambler or the speculator. “The Middleman Ethically Considered”, *The Co-operative News*, 01/16/1897, p. 61.

qualify the universal consumer with a working-class identity, however, co-operators insisted on the “un-Britishness” of the boycott. This stance consolidated a sense of national British identity as a “free trade nation”, with the co-operators as the true Englishmen and women in contrast to the parasitic, unpatriotic middlemen.

Boycotts of co-operative enterprises were a common strategy for associations of traders and shop owners who felt threatened by their co-operative competitors. In the 1890s and 1900s, regional boycotts of co-operatives regularly aroused the consternation of co-operators. In general, these boycotts involved direct and indirect threats to the co-operative movement. Directly, retailers or other salespeople threatened not to do business with co-operators. Indirectly, they threatened to withdraw business from those who did do business with co-operators. A Scottish Butchers’ association, for instance, “advised their [United] States and Canadian shippers to refrain from shipping cattle or sheep on board any company’s steamers who are carrying cattle or sheep for any co-operative society, or for anyone who deals directly or indirectly with co-operative societies.”<sup>39</sup> An early boycott by butchers in Scotland sought to prevent co-operatives from obtaining butcher meat. “But...the main object of the boycott”, declared co-operators, “was to get rid of the co-operative societies in the purchase of American and other foreign stock...so as to obtain that cheap foreign meat still more cheaply when relieved from competition by the co-operators.”<sup>40</sup> Although these boycotts were often short-lived and proved largely ineffective, they exposed important differences in the way co-operators addressed conflicts with businessmen as opposed to laborers. The co-operators took great offense to

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<sup>39</sup> “The Insolence of the Butchers”, *Co-operative News*, 07/17/1897, p. 785.

<sup>40</sup> “The Philosophy of the Boycott”, *Co-operative News*, 12/25/1897, pp. 1442-3

these boycotts and addressed them as a general threat to co-operation. They reported on these threats in the weekly *Co-operative News* and broached the issue in regional and national co-operative meetings, rather than perceiving these as local threats alone. And, as suggested above, co-operators positioned themselves as genuinely British. In this way, the co-operators reaffirmed their commitment to the public interest, one commonly embodied by consumers and included co-operators as well as non-co-operators.<sup>41</sup> But they made it clear that this public was a British one.

In 1902, traders initiated a boycott of co-operatives in St. Helens, a municipality in Northwest England between Liverpool and Manchester. The 170-member St. Helens Grocers' Association decided to boycott co-operative projects and "everyone who has dealings with the co-operative society [of St. Helens, especially], and tradesmen who work for them, together with bankers, doctors, and even churches, and chapels which have any association with the stores."<sup>42</sup> The St. Helens Traders did in fact dismiss some individuals who belonged to or were associated with the co-operative society in St. Helens. Co-operators often pointed to the futility of these boycotts from a public relations standpoint. And in doing so, they expounded on the virtues of co-operation: "The audacity of the boycott has appealed to all lovers of liberty, all social reformers, and all who see in co-operation the hope of the working-classes, and, in fact, of the nations."<sup>43</sup> This appeal to "lovers of freedom" and the "hope of nations" signals the co-operators tendency to make more general political claims when confronted by traders' boycotts. In the case of the St. Helens boycott, the co-operators were not hesitant to align themselves

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<sup>41</sup> See Ch. 4, "Capitalism and the Consumer", pp. 4-9

<sup>42</sup> "The Boycott in England", *Co-operative News*, 07/26/1902, p. 911

<sup>43</sup> "The Ill-Timed Boycott", *Co-operative News*, 10/11/1902, p. 1241

with the “negative reply of the nation” over and against the traders. In a series of discussions surrounding the St. Helens boycott, co-operators raised concerns about parliamentary politics, taxation, and the [British] nation.<sup>44</sup> For their part, the traders objected to co-operators, who did not pay income tax owing to the distribution of co-operative profits among members in the form of a dividend.<sup>45</sup>

This simmering Britishness of co-operative rhetoric sometimes boiled over into truly nationalistic identification. The Secretary of the Co-operative Union, a joint body of co-operators including the C.W.S., delivered an official statement about the boycott: “The small section of co-operators who seek to stem the ever-growing force of co-operation by what they are pleased to call a ‘defense’ movement object strongly to the term ‘boycott’ being applied to their methods knowing as they well do how repulsive to the English mind both the term and the methods are when shown in their actual form.”<sup>46</sup> As Frank Trentmann has shown, the English commitment to free trade did not entail an uncritical endorsement of competition, but was rather joined with a democratic culture of fairness and equity (2008:33-80). But co-operators recognized that this commitment to free trade had a distinctly English cast. “The English mind”, “free commerce”, free trade” peppered co-operative discussions of traders’ boycotts.<sup>47</sup> Co-operators cemented this quintessentially British identification with free trade by alluding to the public and national interests served by co-operation. George Holyoake published a series of papers

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<sup>44</sup> “The Heart-Burning Amongst the Traders”, *Co-operative News*, 10/11/1902, p. 1242; “The Ill-Timed Boycott”, *Co-operative News*, 10/11/1902, p. 1241; “Co-operative Crisis and Cost of Provisions”, *Co-operative News*, 10/18/1902, p. 1265

<sup>45</sup> “Abeawt this Boycott”, *Co-operative News*, 10/18/1902, p. 1268

<sup>46</sup> “The Boycott. A System of Inquisition”, J.C. Gray, *Co-operative News*, 10/23/1902, p. 1286

<sup>47</sup> “Boycott Again”, *Co-operative News*, 09/07/1907, p. 1105; “Anti-Boycott Papers: Traders on the Warpath”, G.J. Holyoake, *Co-operative News*, 11/15/1902, p. 1365;

dedicated to, “the connection of co-operation with public interests.”<sup>48</sup> This generic language of public interest, however, often morphed into full-fledged national identification. The editors of the *Co-operative News* drew an analogy between “Colonials [who] helped Great Britain when once war was unhappily declared in South Africa” and “co-operators outside the menaced districts” who were loyally bound to support their brethren.<sup>49</sup> In his papers, Holyoake instructed his readers that “What is here said is not addressed alone to adversaries in St. Helens, but to the nation.”<sup>50</sup>

This response, which aligned co-operative interests with English national interests and an English culture of free trade, was elicited by the traders who sought a hearing with co-operatives in the court of public opinion. The culture of free trade entailed a commitment to freedom; restrictions on trade, for instance, were understood as bad for businesses *and* common people because they would result in higher prices. The co-operators were well aware of the unpleasant connotations of the boycott as coercive. Thus they committed themselves to the moral project of educating the public of their responsibilities and voluntarily joining the co-operative movement.<sup>51</sup> Members of the women’s guild and the C.W.S., for instance, hosted and advocated conferences in support

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<sup>48</sup> “Anti-Boycott Papers: Traders on the Warpath”, G.J. Holyoake, *Co-operative News*, 11/15/1902, p. 1365

<sup>49</sup> “The Waning Boycott”, *Co-operative News*, 11/15/1902, p.

<sup>50</sup> “Anti-Boycott Papers: Co-operation: Defensive and Defiant”, G.J. Holyoake, *Co-operative News*, 01/17/1903, p. 58

<sup>51</sup> Beatrice and Sydney Webb differentiated voluntary and involuntary co-operation, the former included consumer co-operation. This voluntary nature of consumer’s co-operation, in part, convinced the Webb’s that it was necessarily limited in scope, especially in comparison with compulsory forms of collective action and services organized by and through the state (e.g. public utilities, municipal governments, etc.). See “Special Supplement on the Co-operative Movement”, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *The New Statesmen*, 05/30/1914, pp. 33-34

of free trade policies.<sup>52</sup> Both the Women’s Guild and the C.W.S. publicized their educational outreach in terms that emphasized the non-coercive power of knowledge—it was thus voluntarily up to individuals to join the co-operative movement. The Guild aimed “to spread a knowledge of the *advantages* of co-operation”, while the C.W.S. repeatedly raised the issue of co-operative education to “raise the taste of [co-operative] members.”<sup>53</sup> At the time of the St. Helens boycott, some co-operators observed, “the question before the country at present is education, and where can there be found a more educational body than among co-operators, each important society having its educational fund, while many keep open both classes and reading rooms.”<sup>54</sup>

When they assailed the traders’ joint action as a “boycott”, which they did assiduously, co-operators traded on this unfavorable British association between boycotts and coercion. Such a gesture positioned the co-operators as simultaneously more fair and more British than the traders who forced consumers and other businesspeople to choose between co-operatives and “normal” traders. The boycott was inimical to “lovers of freedom”, an attempt “to compel the public”, and groundless “intimidation.”<sup>55</sup> While the co-operators, then, were not always explicit about this British culture of free trade, they used a language that resonated entirely with its voluntaristic culture, a point of pride

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<sup>52</sup> As a member of the Women’s Guild wrote, “The guild realised early the importance of the free trade controversy...The strong speeches and unanimous vote at the guild annual congress showed how alive members were to the evils of a protective policy [i.e. a policy opposed to free trade]”. *Twenty-first Annual Report of the Women’s Co-operative Guild*, April 1903-1904, p. 10; see also, [look up CWS example]

<sup>53</sup> “Objects of the Women’s Co-operative League”, Women’s Corner, *Co-operative News*, 05/12/1883, p. 396; “Co-operative Education”, W.C. Jones, *Co-operative News* 05/23/1885, p. 445; “Educational Convention”, *Co-operative News*, 08/07/1886, p. 799

<sup>54</sup> “The Ill-Timed Boycott”, *Co-operative News*, 11/11/1902, p. 1240

<sup>55</sup> “The Boycott”, G.J. Holyoake, *Co-operative News*, 10/18/1902; “Co-operative Crisis and Cost of Provisions”, *Co-operative News*, 10/18/1902; “The Ill-Timed Boycott”, *Co-operative News*, 11/11/1902, p. 1240

among the British. At the turn of the twentieth century, for instance, co-operators questioned British tax policies. Members of the C.W.S. and the Women's Guild campaigned against taxes on sugar, corn, tea, coffee, and other national duties.<sup>56</sup> In a discussion of the 1895 national budget, co-operators called for the reduction or abolition of duties on coffee, tea, dried fruits, and tobacco, concluding that "all measures must be taken into a measure of relief to the poor taxpayer and consumer."<sup>57</sup> But co-operators made this association between boycotts, coercion, and Britishness even more explicit when reflecting on a boycott in 1897: "...the newspapers are unanimously of the opinion that the very worst way to fight the battle of the individual trader is the discredited and un-British boycott."<sup>58</sup> Even in the first World War, as the British cultural commitment to democratic and egalitarian free trade began to break apart (Trentmann 2008:191-240), co-operators affirmed the importance of non-coercive free trade. "For the best way to make all nations prosperous," wrote one co-operator, "is for each to supply the things that it can make best...and get from others the things it can get less easily or not at all."<sup>59</sup>

Thus, when confronted with the agitations of businessmen and traders, co-operators, as a whole, resorted to their identification as British to defend themselves. In doing so, the co-operators drew upon a common narrative of Britishness supplied by the democratic language of free trade. This had the effect of qualifying the universal appeal of co-operators from the universal consumer to the British consumer, a tension with which co-operators themselves sometimes wrestled. For instance, in support of a co-

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<sup>56</sup> Twentieth Annual Report of the Women's Co-operative Guild, "National and Municipal Affairs", Apr. 1902-03, p. 10; Nineteenth Annual Report of the Women's Co-operative Guild, April 1901-02, p. 4;

<sup>57</sup> "The Next Budget", *Co-operative News*, 01/19/1895, pp. 60-61

<sup>58</sup> "The Collapse of the Boycott", *Co-operative News*, 09/04/1897, p. 972

<sup>59</sup> "Co-operators and Free-Trade", *Co-operative News*, 05/06/1916, p. 486.

operative shopping week, a member of the Women's Guild observed, "It should give us an opportunity of explaining to our children that to be "All-Co-operative" is a far finer and nobler spirit than to be "All-British," for co-operation holds out the hand of fellowship to all kinds and conditions of men and to all nationalities."<sup>60</sup> In comparison with their labor struggles, the co-operators were substantially more unified in their responses to businessmen. Furthermore, they were less apt to stress their particular identification as working class consumers in favor of a British national one.

For their consumer activism, these gender, class, and national characteristics gained salience through a series of practical problems—clashes with businessmen and labor. Depending on the nature of the conflict—the groups involved, especially—different characteristics became relevant in their practical attempts to resolve them. A conflict with workers, whom they perceived as a friendly foe, drove co-operators working-class origins to the surface. At the same time, co-operators' qualified their broader consumer-centered rhetoric. In doing so, co-operators reasserted the extent to which they tailored membership toward *working-class* consumers. Furthermore, as co-operators were a working-class group in conflict with another working class group, this conflict exposed the fissures within these groups, thereby opening up the opportunity for fissures among co-operators to come to the fore. In this case, labor issues provided an opportunity for explicit conflict over gender roles in the co-operative movement. On the other hand, a conflict with traders, whom co-operators perceived as an intransigent foe, elicited cross-class identification as British. This challenge unified co-operators around a

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<sup>60</sup> "Our Shopping Week", *Co-operative News*, 03/25/1911, p. 373

cross-cutting national identity, which had the consequence of minimizing the extent to which gender inequity shaped co-operative strategies explicitly.

d) Working Around Labor: the National Consumers' League and the AFL

Like the C.W.S. and the Women's Guild, the National Consumers' League clashed with laborers and businessmen. This analogy allows me to reconstruct the NCL's clashes with laborers and businesses and to compare their practical responses to these dilemmas with co-operators. In their clashes with business and labor, the NCL adopted a different approach than the co-operators that reflected their (the NCL) distinctive class position. Furthermore, for a second time, we will see how the gender identity inflected consumer activism, this time in the NCL's practical dealings with predominantly male labor and business groups. To preview, the NCL drew from a wealthier constituency than the co-operators. Their class position allowed the NCL to adopt a more conciliatory approach to both laborers and businessmen. In short, they downplayed their class position and adopted a middle way between the warring positions of business and labor. Of course, this did not smooth over all of the conflicts between the groups. In fact, this steadfast commitment to remain non-partisan and stand above class-conflict exacerbated conflicts between the NCL and the trade unions. In addition, as an upper-middle class women's organization with a largely symbolic male constituency, the NCL drew on their feminine identification to mark out strategies and spheres for their activism in relation to labor and business groups. Even when this gender identification limited the kinds of activism the NCL could pursue, they reformulated their consumerist principles to pursue

other strategies aimed at supply-side social reforms with equal vigor, especially state-based policies.

The National Consumers' League had a fraught but supportive relationship with labor. When the NCL was founded, they sought to address an "oversight" on the part of labor unions—women and child laborers. Many labor unions were focused on workers that would be a benefit to the union. By contrast, those workers that they perceived as in need of protection would have been more a burden to them than a boon. Thus from the beginning, the league defined the scope of their activism on the terrain of labor unions. In the second meeting of the yet-to-be-constituted Consumers' League, Florence Kelley indicated, "the fact that the Union Label, does not ensure sanitary conditions in manufactures, and that there are no unions in the manufactures of women's and children's white underwear."<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, the first drafted constitution positioned the League's work as an extension, both in breadth and depth, of the trade union label.<sup>62</sup> Ultimately, the league resolved to avail themselves of the information collected by trade unions, but their standards for awarding the label were not trade union standards. Before the league was officially constituted, the representatives voted to award labels to manufacturers whose goods were made exclusively on the premises and paid a fair wage, both of which were to be confirmed by a factory inspector.<sup>63</sup> Thus, while the league was happy to use information from trade unions, their standards were not defined by the

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<sup>61</sup> Second Meeting of the Conference on the Federation of Consumers' Leagues , 05/17/1898, Reel 14, Slide 247

<sup>62</sup> Second Meeting of the Conference on the Federation of Consumers' Leagues , 05/17/1898, Reel 14, 248-253

<sup>63</sup> Second Meeting of the Conference on the Federation of Consumers' Leagues , 05/17/1898, Reel 14, 248

unions; in particular, they would not withhold the label from an employer who employed non-union labor at a fair wage.

At times, the league found it immensely difficult to co-ordinate with labor unions, especially because they focused on “weaker” workers, i.e. women and children. In 1916, New York a proposed canners’ bill permitted the employment of women over eighteen to work twelve hours a day and seventy-two hours a week during parts of the canning season. The labor unions supported the bill. Pauline Goldmark, a member of the Consumers’ League of New York, remarked, “it had been found impossible to co-operate with the labor unions, who supported Commissioner Lynch absolutely...[and] there was a tendency for the employers to unite against the reformers who represent the interests of women and unorganized labor, as well as the public.”<sup>64</sup> For strategic reasons, most likely, the unions were cautious to advocate on behalf of women workers, although many rank and file activists, as well as women’s trade unions, were decidedly opposed to the canners’ bill. Eventually, the canners’ bill was vetoed by the New York governor Charles Whitman (Felt 1965).

When the NCL came into contact with labor in the course of their advocacy, they took care not to disturb the sleeping giant. For instance, a member of the Consumers’ League of Kentucky described a campaign for child labor laws as follows: “Our child labor committee, therefore, gave up their part of the work in order not to interfere with the work of the unions.”<sup>65</sup> In this instance, the Consumers’ League of Kentucky may have

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<sup>64</sup> “Report on Wages/Hours of Labor”, Pauline Goldmark, *National Consumers’ League Archives*, Reel 14, Slide 451

<sup>65</sup> “Consumers’ League of Kentucky”, *National Consumers’ League Archives*, 03/04/1903, Reel 3, Slide 497

had a legitimate need not to duplicate the efforts of labor unions, who were involved in the investigation of conditions in factories. Similarly, the Consumers' League of Massachusetts consulted with Florence Kelley about providing a manufacturer with the label. They voted to approve the label for Hecht, a manufacturer of boys' knickerbockers, if it was not found to antagonize the trade union label.<sup>66</sup> The point is, in this case as in many others, the league deferred to labor in terms of the scope of their action or clashed with labor over their advocacy.

In general, the NCL's inclination was to avoid provoking the unions in any way. Yet, this desire to avoid union approbation was accompanied by a central strategy—product labeling—destined to antagonize labor unions in some way. In a 1903 meeting of the labeling committee, members voted on whether to field a presentation from a Mrs. O'Sullivan of the Union Label League. Mrs. O'Sullivan “violently” opposed the consumers' league label, which she claimed the league had “stolen from the Unions.”<sup>67</sup> While this provocation did not deter the league in their labeling efforts at this point, it set the tone for the conflict which would bring about the label's end fifteen years later. In 1911, the league considered pursuing a label in the field of knitted underwear, the Label committee recommended “that as there is already a Union in the trades making knitted underwear and hosiery, the Consumers' League shall not go into this field.”<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, league members were attuned to the ways that competition, whether genuine or superficial, could benefit the aims of labor unions and consumers' leagues. As

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<sup>66</sup>“Monthly Executive Meeting”, Consumers' League of Massachusetts, *National Consumers' League Archives*, 01/30/1902, Reel 16, Slide 38

<sup>67</sup> 1903 Annual Meeting Report, Reel 16, Slide 159

<sup>68</sup> Label Committee Report, *National Consumers' League Archives*, 05/19/1911, Reel 14, Slide 360

Frederick Stimson, counsel member of the league, argued: “The value of the Consumers’ Leagues [is] in supporting good labor conditions, etc. we cannot join with them [unions] on account of diversity of other objects, and really it is advantageous for both to work in harmony if in apparent competition.”<sup>69</sup>

Even if league members were often personally sympathetic to the work of unions, they were uncertain about the consequences of appearing too sympathetic as a group. This was especially relevant given the way that the NCL needed to work with businesses to disseminate their label. For instance, Florence Kelley announced her support for labor in private correspondence but was more circumspect about public declarations as league secretary. In her second report as league secretary, Kelley positioned the NCL as a necessary complement to labor organizing: “It remained for the workers themselves to discover and apply the simple device which enables the purchaser to discriminate by means of the label in favor of goods made under right conditions. Yet, after the workers had been doing this for more than fifteen years, and had redeemed the two great trades of the printers and the cigarmakers, it was still a far from cheering outlook which confronted the National Consumers' League at its formation in May, 1899.”<sup>70</sup> The league defined its work in relation to labor unions without wanting to be seen as a mere extension of union aims and goals.

The Consumers’ League label, in particular, evoked the ire of trade unionists throughout the first two decades of the NCL’s existence. This great conflict with labor simmered from the league’s founding until it boiled over in 1918 when the Consumers’

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<sup>69</sup> 1903 Annual Meeting Report, Reel 16, Slide 159

<sup>70</sup> Second Annual Report of the National Consumers’ League, “Report of the Secretary”, 1900-01, p. 12

League officially abandoned the label. The unfolding of this particular conflict illuminates how the NCL reshaped their repertoire of consumerist strategies, while retaining their consumerist rhetoric. But the conflict evolved over the course of several years, as the labor union's protests increased in vigor and induced the NCL to reconsider the label as a strategy. As implied above, the NCL distinguished their labels from union labels decisively. In 1910, for instance, the League's Label Committee resolved: "That the Label Committee be given power to endorse from time to time (and also to withdraw such endorsements) the label of any Union which may seek such endorsement, in any industry related to the work in which the Consumers' League is engaged, provided that this label covers in its requirements the requirements established for the use of the label of the National Consumers' League."<sup>71</sup> The league was open to endorse union labels, but only in the instance that the workplace in question conformed to the league standards. There was no guarantee that a workplace that met the approval of a trade union would meet the standards of the Consumers' League and vice versa. In this way, the league pursued a label that could easily run afoul of trade unionists.

In the second decade of the twentieth-century, labor unions complained that the Consumers' League label was being deployed strategically to paper over certain employers' refusal to negotiate with workers. Thus, the employer could hide behind the league label, while simultaneously employing tactics hostile to labor unions such as hiring replacement workers and negotiating in bad faith. In 1916, the league responded to the protests of unions with the following change in the label contract, provided to

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<sup>71</sup> "Report of the Label Committee", 1910 Annual Report of the National Consumers' League, Reel 4, Slide 17.

producers who were authorized to display the label on their garments: “That there shall be inserted in the contract after due notice to the manufacturers, a clause stating in substance that where a strike occurs and arbitration is refused by employers, the contract is automatically cancelled.”<sup>72</sup> This change, however, was a temporary measure and even members of the league recognized it as such. They simultaneously began to question the viability of a labeling strategy that allowed employers undue leverage in their relations with workers and that exacerbated lingering tensions with the unions. The executive committee members suggested that the label problem was “so big” that they might consider a plan “which might supersede the work of the Label Committee.”<sup>73</sup>

Early in 1918, shortly after this incident, Florence Kelley issued a “Memorandum on the Label”, which laid out the problem in greater detail.<sup>74</sup> She cited new opposition of the A.F.L. to the continued use of the Consumers’ League label. Two years prior, Kelley noted, trade unions in Boston threatened a boycott of the factory, “label and all”, would result if the employer did not resolve the strike immediately. Even more troubling, Kelley reported, the A.F.L. began to attack the N.C.L., “stating that employers hostile to unions affiliated with the Federation can and do use the Consumers’ League label as a cloak for their hostility.” Given that the League had no way of ascertaining whether employers who rejected the union label were using the League label, Kelley remarked that “our position is obviously untenable as friends of labor, if we persist in pushing our label as a rival to the label of the A.F.L., against the protests of union officials.” Here Kelley

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<sup>72</sup> Seventeenth Annual Meeting of the National Consumers’ League Executive Committee, Minutes, Reel 4, Slide 391.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> References in this paragraph all from “Memorandum on the Label”, Florence Kelley, *National Consumers’ League Archives*, Reel 4, Slide 429.

admitted the uncertain status of the league label, owing to the direct protestations of labor unions. But she also admitted that the league label worked as a “rival” to the trade union label, thus owning up to the implicit antagonism between union and consumers’ league strategies.

Perhaps most tellingly, Kelley’s letter acknowledged the League’s sympathy with *and* difference from labor with the phrase “friends of labor.” Unlike co-operators, who could identify *as* working-class laborers, this option was not open to the N.C.L. Moreover as friends of labor, the N.C.L. needed to find ways to work with labor and did not defend their unintentional antagonism with the labor movement. Recall that co-operators could claim to truly represent the interests of laborers by pursuing their consumer activism and the co-operative brand. The Co-operative Wholesale Society, in particular, could point to rank-and-file trade unionist who claimed, in the face of trade union opposition, that the C.W.S. label “ought to be sufficient for every man or woman in the society.”<sup>75</sup> By contrast, if the N.C.L. insisted on the value of the label in the face of sustained resistance from labor, they would have had to rescind their claim to be friends of labor.

The juxtaposition of the N.C.L. with the C.W.S. allows us to see the role of class politics in the eventual demise of the league label. After Kelley’s Memorandum, the label continued to limp along for several months until the N.C.L. convened a special meeting, which sealed its fate. After consulting the league attorneys and the executive council, Florence Kelley reported that the league had agreed to jettison the label within 90 days.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> “C.W.S. vs. Label”, *Co-operative News*, 09/23/1911, p. 1211

<sup>76</sup> “Committee on Label”, *National Consumers’ League Archives*, 03/08/1918, Reel 4, Slide 454.

On March 18, 1918, ten days after that meeting, the N.C.L. composed a letter to manufacturers, whom the league had furnished with a template for reproducing and affixing the label to their manufactured goods. The letter began with the following assertion: “The Consumers’ League finding that its label does not now perform the service for which it was originally devised, and believing that the aims of the League can best be promoted through other means, has for several months been considering its discontinuance.”<sup>77</sup> The letter, which instructed manufacturers to destroy the league label template within 90 days, focused on the rising legal standards for industrial production as the reason for abandoning the label. And while the league did, in fact, continue to pursue legal means of improving working conditions, they remained silent on the increasingly vociferous protestations registered by unions. In November of that year, the Consumers’ League struck the following clause from the constitution: “It shall be the special object of the National Consumers’ League to secure adequate investigation of the conditions under which goods are made, in order to enable purchasers to distinguish in favor of goods made in the well-ordered factory.”<sup>78</sup> Thus, even as they shifted away from a strategy that directly antagonized labor unions, the League retained its wary, subterranean relationship with labor, especially before the eyes of businesses.

Despite losing the label to the unions, however, the League reaffirmed its commitment to their founding principles one year later in 1919. In particular, they affirmed that, “Employers who are under the stress of competition are virtually helpless to maintain a high standard as to hours, wages, and working conditions, unless sustained

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<sup>77</sup> “Letter to Manufacturers”, *National Consumers’ League Archives*, 03/18/1918, Reel 4, Slide 455

<sup>78</sup> “NCL Council Meeting Minutes”, *National Consumers’ League Archives*, 11/21/1918, Reel 4, Slide 452

by the cooperation of consumers.”<sup>79</sup> Thus, the N.C.L. remained committed to the consumerist principles set forth at their founding. In a sense, then, the league lost out to labor with respect to their main consumer-oriented strategy by dismantling the label. Furthermore, their commitment to consumers affirmed a commitment to a disinterested middle way between the partisan claims of capital and labor. This reflected, in part, the constituency of the National Consumers’ League. In their conflict with the more working-class and masculine unions, then, the NCL actually shifted their practical work away from consumerist strategies and they reaffirmed their class identification as disinterested reformers vis-à-vis labor.

#### e) Placating Manufacturers

Owing to their official nonpartisanship, the League found themselves in an equally complex but respectful relationship with manufacturers and businessmen. But there were other incentives for the Consumers’ League to preserve cordial relations with businesses: namely, their need to solicit the co-operation of manufacturers in disseminating the label. The league depended on manufacturers’ consent to emblazon their goods with the label and to allow investigators into their factories. Consequently, the Consumers’ League often played a mediating role between competing businesses—those who felt that they were unfairly denied a label and those who felt that other businesses were unfairly awarded a label. The conflicts with businesses were less vociferous and more individualized than the labor conflicts. Consequently, these conflicts were less significant in shaping the league’s practical work than the initial decision to

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<sup>79</sup> “1919 NCL Meeting Minutes”, *National Consumers’ League Archives*, 11/21/1919, Reel 4, Slide 470

solicit the co-operation of manufacturers through the league label. These interactions with manufacturers and businessmen, then, were shaped by the class identifications of league members, who were comfortable addressing businessmen as equals. Furthermore, the class identifications of league members revealed themselves in the kinds of manufacturers and goods that they league focused on in their campaigns.

When the league was in formation, it made strategic decisions about the kind of goods they would focus their advocacy on and the kinds of firms they would approach. Kelly reported on the second meeting as follows: “It was made clear that a consumers’ label should deal first with a higher class of goods—which would be in demand by the constituency of the various leagues. Our work would thus begin with more reputable firms—who should be put under legal bonds, in the use of our label.”<sup>80</sup> In order to get the label off the ground, league members made a concerted effort to draw on the incipient support of the membership and, furthermore, to approach firms that would be similarly oriented toward higher-end goods. There were times when the members worried about the quality of the goods bearing the league label. As one member of the committee on advertising reported, “[An] investigation...showed that the goods endorsed by our League are mostly of inferior quality such as do not appeal to the class of people from which we have, as yet, largely recruited our membership.”<sup>81</sup> From the outset, then, the league courted businesses with whom they could appeal to based on the upper-class constituency of league members. Thus, unlike with the trade unions, the consumers’

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<sup>80</sup> Second Meeting of the Conference of the Federation of Consumers’ Leagues, 05/17/1898, Reel 14, Slide 247.

<sup>81</sup> “Report of the Committee on Advertising”, *National Consumers’ League Archives*, 01/27/1904, Reel 16, Slide 157

league approached manufacturers as relative equals, with the claim that league members would be more likely to purchase goods with the label.<sup>82</sup>

The League needed to persuade businesses to adopt the label, as many businesses were hesitant to be first adopters of the labels, especially without prior knowledge of the Consumers' League as an organization. The Consumers' League of Massachusetts sent a letter to Boston firms, as discussions of a National League surfaced, which sought to bring manufacturers around to the idea of a national league label. In the letter, the Massachusetts League reassured manufacturers and businesses that the league was an unthreatening presence and, furthermore, that they were subject to the same economic laws as the manufacturers: "As encouragement in this undertaking we have the support of economists and the awakened social conscience of our time. Both of these forces recognize that trade is a matter of supply and demand, and that the demand of purchasers may be powerfully influenced by motives of justice and fairness."<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, they anticipated being tarred as interfering with the workings of the market, noting, "It is not in a spirit of interference or coercion, but for the purpose of educating a great body of shoppers to a better and keener sense of personal responsibility, and to a more intelligent use of their influence[.]"<sup>84</sup> Aside from the ideological concerns, there were a set of practical issues to address. Manufacturers were asked to consent, among other things, to periodic inspections by league members as well as the implicit expense involved in

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<sup>82</sup> I am not forgetting the gender part of the equation, which, as others have shown, the league was not afraid of exploiting as a resource in making maternalist claims to justify their concern for vulnerable workers such as women and children, especially to justify their investigation of factory conditions. See Skocpol 1992

<sup>83</sup> "Letter from the Massachusetts League", *National Consumers' League Archives*, 01/08/1898, Reel 16, Slide 75

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

labeling the products themselves. As leagues throughout the country approached businesses and manufacturers, they did so with similar caution and anticipated a hesitant reception.

On the whole, there was a vicious circle out of which the Consumers' League needed to escape in order for businesses to adopt the label at all. None of the manufacturers cared to use the label unless demand warranted, and, further, none had confidence in the demand being stable—even if the league presented letters signed by consumers. While at the same time, the league needed to sustain interest in the label among consumers, which was dying out thanks to the absence of any labels on the market. Kelley described how, at this moment, the decision of one firm to adopt it transformed the fate of the label: “At this discouraging moment, the George Frost Manufacturing Company undertook to use license No. 1, and proceeded to attach labels to garments sent out from their factory. The high standing of this firm rendered it comparatively easy to enlist other manufacturers.”<sup>85</sup> The league members had the difficult task, therefore, of asking manufacturers to take on a risky proposition, without any clear benefit in line for the first movers.

Naturally, even after some businesses began to consent to league inspections and offered to use the label, the league continued to confront resistance. Florence Kelley, in her broad and frequent travels, visited Boston, for instance, to convince a factory owner that he could stamp the label on a box rather than pin the label on each article.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> “Report of the Secretary”, The Second Annual Report of the National Consumers' League, 03/01/1901, p. 10

<sup>86</sup> “Monthly Meeting, Massachusetts League”, *National Consumers' League Archives*, 05/24/1900, Reel 16, Slide 42

Some manufacturers were hesitant and looked for reasons not to adopt the label for a variety of reasons. In the early years of the league, Florence Kelley reported that some manufacturers would not adopt the label, “[B]ecause their owners are not yet convinced that the constituency of the League is sufficiently stable and persistent to justify them in undertaking the slight expense involved in printing and attaching the label.”<sup>87</sup> By the end of the third year soliciting and inspecting factories, the league had convinced 38 manufacturers across 12 states to adopt the league label and increased slowly throughout the first decade of the new century.<sup>88</sup>

But taking up the label was not the only issue that the League faced when dealing with manufacturers. Manufacturers could also take offense at any apparent preference shown toward labor unions. One manufacturer, F.B. Hastings, wrote a letter “Protesting against our [the League’s] becoming identified with trades unions as exemplified by our taking part in the industrial exhibit.”<sup>89</sup> Even in interactions with trade unions, members of the Consumers’ Leagues insisted on maintaining their position of neutrality. When a Mr. Manning, organizer for a Laundry Union, solicited the League’s help, they were happy to furnish him with literature, but were concerned to preserve their “neutral attitude in the Trades Union question.”<sup>90</sup> Coupled with their class-rooted desire to transcend the petty, particularistic grievances of labor and business, the skittish attitudes of manufacturers gave League members further reason to maintain some visible distance from labor.

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<sup>87</sup> “Report of the Secretary”, The Second Annual Report of the National Consumers’ League, 03/01/1901, p. 7

<sup>88</sup> The Third Annual Report of the National Consumers’ League, 03/04/1902, p. 7; Eighth Annual Report of the National Consumers’ League, 03/05/1907, p. 14

<sup>89</sup> “Monthly Meeting, Massachusetts League”, *National Consumers’ League Archives*, 05/1907 (?), Reel 16, Slide 123

<sup>90</sup> “Monthly Meeting, Massachusetts League”, *National Consumers’ League Archives*, 01/08/1908, Reel 16, Slide 114

Newton Baker, the League president in the 1910s, wrote as much to Samuel Gompers, head of the A.F.L., when he rejected the “natural” or “biological” antagonism between workers and employers, which maimed a more general sense of community: “To me, industrial relations, in the U.S., have for the last twenty-five years, been a war – a civil war, a class war – for which the respective sides are constantly preparing.”<sup>91</sup> But in order to be brokers of a peace between workers and employers, the league needed to show deference to both parties, without alienating either.

As a whole, the employers were less likely to band together as a group, but individually the Consumers’ League had to court firms to join their cause. This placed the League in an explicitly deferential relationship with employers, one that was encouraged by and encouraged their class-inflected commitment to transcending the conflicts between workers and laborers. As the league ended their labeling campaign owing to the protestations of labor, Florence Kelley addressed manufacturers, concluding, “For all the help you have given, the League will remain lastingly grateful.”<sup>92</sup> While hardly revealing on its own, this statement captures the extent to which the league needed to ingratiate itself to manufacturers just for the opportunity to label goods. While this relationship with manufacturers did not induce the League to change course, as with labor, it did throw up distinct obstacles in their dealings with firms on a case by case basis. Furthermore, this need for manufacturers’ approval required the league to depend on manufacturers. At the same time, the N.C.L. sympathized with labor in spite of their different class positions and thus depended on labor’s good graces to remain supportive of them. Because they

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<sup>91</sup> “Letter to Samuel Gompers”, *National Consumers’ League Archives*, 1918 [?], Reel 23, Slide 735

<sup>92</sup> “Letter to Manufacturers”, *National Consumers’ League Archives*, 03/18/1918, Reel 4, Slide 455

depended on labor and business alike, a consequence that followed from both their class character as well as organizational structure, the N.C.L. was able to reinforce the image of themselves as a neutral public intermediary between both groups.

#### The Labyrinthine Paths of Action

In general, these conflicts with labor and business groups demonstrate how class, gender, and national identifications as well as organizational logics came to matter to consumer activists' policies and strategies. Because the historical details are so intricate, it would be a fool's errand to crystallize a single, generic causal pathway or set of pathways that obtain for the particular "variables" in question: class, gender, nationality, and organizational form. Moreover, I am not claiming that these characteristics were irrelevant before, only that they became explicit cues for action in and through the challenges posed by labor and business. To arrive at a more general conclusion about the dynamics of action, we must attend to the shared manner in which these characteristics surfaced as cues that guided and reshaped activists' shared, consumer-oriented repertoires of action. I have shown that the need to address labor and business as audiences directed activists along labyrinthine paths, shaped explicitly by the class, gender, national, and organizational character of each group. These labyrinthine paths stand in contrast to the remarkably similar repertoires of action that arose when they addressed consumers via commodities and responded to imperatives of action in their diagnoses of capitalist modernity. In this conclusion, I summarize how these characteristics became cues for action in consumer activists' bouts with labor and business.

I begin with organizational imperatives or logics. These organizational imperatives help to explain why these activists caved to various demands of labor and business or stood their ground (Binder 2002). Members of the C.W.S. operated stores. As such, their existence depended on people becoming members of the stores and spending their money. They needed people to consume. Thus, the C.W.S. was especially dependent on consumers and had a “natural” investment in them. When challenged by labor in particular, they were able to rely on this organizational imperative to support their more generic identification as a consumers’ movement. While formed to support co-operatives, the Women’s Guild had more institutional flexibility than their male counterparts. They were not beholden to consumers in the same way as the C.W.S.—committed though they were to the co-operative movement as an organization of consumers. We can see this flexibility when they supported trade unions in their conflicts with the C.W.S., especially in the conflicts over unionizing co-operative employees. The National Consumers’ League had similar organizational flexibility as the Women’s Guild. The N.C.L. was committed to the elimination of sweatshops and child labor by mobilizing an intelligent, ethical consumer demand. But this did not preclude legislation or legal advocacy, which permitted them a fallback not explicitly directed toward consumer mobilization. But to stop at organizational imperatives, gives us only a partial understanding of their responses to these clashes with labor and business. These organizational imperatives cannot explain how consumer activists responded to the challenges of labor and business or even *if* they would respond to their challenges at all.

The class and gender characteristics of these groups became cues for action when others' challenged the notion that activists' were true sympathizers. For the Co-operative Wholesale Society, the conflicts with trade unions especially elicited unapologetic assertions of co-operators' own working class backgrounds. Co-operators' identified themselves as working class *consumers* above all else. But this established the C.W.S. as in sympathy with the cause of working class improvement. This identification as working class actually reinforced the consumerist tactics of the C.W.S. while simultaneously chastening their bolder universal vision of the ethical consumer. These same conflicts drove the working-class origins of the Co-operative Women's Guild to the surface. But rather than identify as working class *consumers*, they identified as *working class consumers*. To fully understand this consequence, we need to consider co-operative gender dynamics. Given the significant but unappreciated roles that women played in the co-operative movement as both employees and as consumers, the conflicts with trade unions offered the opportunity to improve the station of women in the co-operative movement. It was also an opportunity to challenge many co-operators' assumption that co-operation was a masculine endeavor. Thus, these conflicts brought out the Guild's working class backgrounds in the crucible of co-operative gender dynamics. Finally, conflicts with both labor and business foreground the National Consumers' League upper-class and gender qualities. Labor and business conflicts encouraged the N.C.L. to embrace their maternal roles in protecting workers that fell outside of typical labor (especially A.F.L.) organizing. At the same time, these conflicts reinforced the class distance between the N.C.L. and the labor unions. They also elicited class-based attempts

to identify with the businessmen, whom the N.C.L. needed to enroll in their labeling campaign. Ultimately, the N.C.L.'s conflicts with business and labor had the inverse effect of similar conflicts on the C.W.S.: for the N.C.L., these conflicts reinforced the neutral or nonpartisan vision of the ethical consumer, while they chastened their consumerist tactics.

Nationality surfaced as a cue for action through more antagonistic conflicts. Co-operators and merchants jockeyed for better standing in the court of public opinion. Rather than accentuate their working class identity, the co-operators accentuated their cross-class British identity. In particular, they cast free and British co-operation against the coercive, un-British boycotts employed by the merchants. These strategic appeals played upon the common British association of Free Trade with freedom and protectionism with slavery. Because the National Consumers' League played up their own neutral position between businesses and labor, they rarely antagonized them openly, which diminished the incentive that these groups needed to position themselves as full-blooded Americans.

As the National Consumers' League, Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative Guild fended off challenges from labor and business, they pursued idiosyncratic lines of action. These actions were formed in the crucible of characteristics—class, gender, nation, organizational logics—that were always with them. Yet as consumer activists, they had articulated visions and pursued strategies that relegated these characteristics to the background – however tenuously. By examining their analogous conflicts with labor and business, we can see how these characteristics

moved from the background to the foreground and became explicit cues for action. The conflicts with business and labor encouraged activists to define and solve distinct, but related sets of problems – from the attempts to remain sympathetic with laborers and the gendered character of consumer activism, labor unions, and the business world to antagonistic clashes with merchants.

Pragmatic and interpretive accounts of action sometimes risk undermining classic sociological concerns with “structure.” In prior chapters, I have suggested that we can keep such concerns in view by identifying analogous problems faced by actors and tracing them to similar contexts and audiences – in the case of these consumer activists, the growth of capitalist marketplaces and mass-produced commodities. This same approach allows us to preserve and reconstruct the labyrinthine, seemingly idiosyncratic paths that action often takes in light of our many social identities. While activists’ never “transcended” or left these social identities behind, their relevance to the course of their activism shifted with the challenges they faced. As such, this approach offers a precise way to draw out the particular “intersections” of consumer activists’ social identities, while keeping their general concerns with the nature of capitalist societies in view. But challenges from labor and business were far from the only ones faced by consumer activists. In the next chapter, I take up the classic problem of collective action as it surfaced in activists’ attempts to induce ethical purchasing among their membership – a problem that has proved especially tricky for consumer activists to solve.

## Chapter 5 – The Undisciplined Consumer: Collective Action and Akrasia

Consumer activism is a notoriously tricky endeavor. If it is to be at all successful, consumer activism must be a collective project, premised on the joint and consistent coordination of many individual consumers dispersed over time and across space. That is, consumer activism presents collective action problems. Turn-of-the-twentieth century consumer activists were acutely aware of these problems and they devoted considerable effort to awakening the general public to their responsibilities as consumers. As I have shown, they conjured and circulated images of the labor process in the hope that these would stimulate ethical purchasing. But unveiling the mystified working conditions for the greater public was not the only concern for these activists. Activists' also needed to encourage flesh and blood consumers to adopt and remain faithful to the principles and practices of ethical consumerism. After all, the National Consumers' League, the Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative Guild were member-based organizations. While activists' could write off the general public as ignorant or misinformed, they expected that their fellow members were at the very least awake to their duties as consumers.

In this chapter, I demonstrate three things. First, the National Consumers' League, the Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative Guild confronted weakness of the will as an obstacle to collective action. Because they trusted that fellow members' knew and valued the appropriate way to act, activists' highlighted the failure to act with sufficient self-control as a crucial obstacle to coordinated purchasing. Second, I show that the issue of insufficient self-control or akrasia presented distinctive obstacles to

ethical consumption. The problem was not simply to provide reasons to act collectively, but to transform and discipline the desires of individual consumers. Third, I show that the attempts to overcome this collective action problem were shaped by organizational differences between the Co-operative groups and the National Consumers' League. Because of the centrality of the store to co-operative culture, co-operators drew much stronger distinctions between members and non-members. Whereas co-operators often identified members' failure to purchase as weakness of the will, the National Consumers' League identified failure to purchase ethical goods as an organizational failure. Thus, co-operators confronted weakness of the will as distinctive problems.

First, I briefly survey collective action problems as they pertain to consumer activists and common tactics for solving them. I relate these issues specifically to weakness of the will. Then I present activists' ongoing efforts to resolve these collective action issues. I argue that these efforts suggest two distinctive, but interrelated collective action problems – insufficient reasons to act and weakness of the will. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of why the problem of weakness of the will mattered differently to the Co-operatives and the National Consumers' League.

#### Collective Action Problems

One common instance of a collective action problem involves the lack of individual reasons to join with others in pursuit of a collective good – now commonly known as the free rider problem. The definition of a collective good varies from group to group, but as Mancur Olson noted, “the very fact that a goal or purpose is *common* to a group means that no one in the group is excluded from the benefit or satisfaction brought

about by its achievement. [italics in original]” (1965:15)<sup>1</sup> Turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists’ certainly satisfy these basic criteria in their efforts to mobilize ethical purchasing to reform the labor process, especially. These efforts to reform the labor process required the implicit coordination of many different consumers. The most general problem for consumer activists was to awaken the public to their sense of responsibility to physically and culturally distant laborers. Consumers had to *want* to purchase ethical goods for the sake of these distant laborers. This is a problem of feeling responsible to invisible laborers. I have already described activists’ use of sensory techniques as a common tactic for inducing ethical purchasing in the general public. But activists’ also confronted the problem of securing consistent ethical purchasing among those already awakened to these responsibilities, however imperfectly—among the members of their organizations. In short, activists’ confronted the problem of members’ weakness of will in light of their desires as consumers. This is a problem of consistency *given* the feeling of responsibility. This latter problem of consistency is the one I take up here.

First, it will be helpful to characterize this collective action problem in greater detail and survey some common solutions offered by social scientists. For consumer activists, the problem of consistently purchasing ethical goods followed from the increasing availability and range of mass-produced goods in turn-of-the-twentieth century capitalist societies. To address these issues required sustained and organized expressions of purchasing power. In the words of one co-operator, “the producer puts up the

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<sup>1</sup> As subsequent commentators have noted, Olson’s generic account elides relevant differences in the character of collective action (Ostrom 2008; Oliver, Marwell, and Teixeira 1985). I will enumerate several specific features of the collective action problems as they pertain to consumer activists below. Consequently, I use the generic definition only to affirm that consumer activists’ met these basic characteristics.

purchasing price of his commodities and everybody else who handles them between him and the consumer follows suit...and eventually it is all heaped upon the shoulders of the *disorganized* consumer.”<sup>2</sup> To drive the point home further, one can recall the N.C.L. constitution, which characterized the employer as “virtually helpless” to maintain reasonable wages and working conditions “unless sustained by the co-operation of consumers.”<sup>3</sup> Activists’ knew that effective ethical purchasing required co-operation and organization on behalf of consumers. But consumers’ co-operation and organization had to occur at a complex, disaggregated, often individual level. For consumers’ organization to be effective, many individual consumers had to purchase ethical goods repeatedly and privately. To put it differently, the consistent coordination of consumers was inevitably distributed across space and over time.

Having established the problem of consumers’ consistent coordination, we can reconsider collective action problems in general. The purpose is to clarify how collective action problems were relevant to consumer activists. The classic problem of collective action is that rational individual behavior does not result in rational group outcomes (Olson 1965; Sandler 1992). When it comes to securing public goods or avoiding harmful external costs, rational individuals will not co-operate to achieve these aims in the absence of selective incentives for individuals or institutional design. To attenuate the individualistic assumptions of these rational choice based accounts, many sociologists have emphasized the role of framing (Snow et. al 1986; Benford and Snow 2000), social networks (Gould 1993), and emotions (Jasper 1997) in collective action. Although these

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<sup>2</sup> “The Consumer’s Burden”, *Co-operative News*, 10/07/1911, p. 1281 [emphasis added]

<sup>3</sup> “Article III”, *National Consumers’ League Constitution*

non-rational choice based concerns are important (and they will be directly relevant to efforts to surmount these issues), we can best articulate the problem of consumers' consistent coordination with the aid of rational choice approaches to collective action. Thus, the problem was to motivate each member to "coordinate", i.e. to consistently purchase ethically-made goods in spite of their individual distribution across space and over time.<sup>4</sup>

According to collective action theorists, the likelihood of undertaking collective action varies with a range of factors, some of which are stable and others which are contingent: the number of participants, the heterogeneity of participants, the nature of the desired benefits (shared or rival), form of communication (face-to-face or mediated), the relationship between one's contribution and the desired collective good (production function), available information about other's actions, one's position in social networks, the possibility of choosing whether or not to participate, situational norms as well as decision-making heuristics, social reputations, and reciprocity (Heckathorn 1996; Ostrom 2008; Marwell and Oliver 2001; Sandler 1992; Weber, Kopelmann, and Messick 2004). As one might expect, when considering consumer activism in light of these factors, the likelihood of sustained consumer coordination seems slim. After all, when it comes to participation, ethical purchasing is frequently individuated. Moreover, many consumers would need to participate repeatedly and at some cost to secure the desired good. Additionally, the desired good of reforming the social conditions of labor is "shared" and

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<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, one could argue that these individual consumer choices are themselves socially structured and I would accept that claim – few would reject it. But the appropriate comparative contrasts to consumer activism are other forms of collective action such as public campaigns and demonstrations. In this light, consumer activism looks like "individualized collective action." While I take issue with her periodization, Michele Micheletti provides an overview of individualized collective action, see Micheletti (2003:24-34).

therefore subject to concerns of free riding – that is, members would have the incentive to not purchase goods ethically and still be able to reap the “reward” of labor reform in the event that it occurred. Further still, ethical purchasers would not have accessible information about others’ consistency and contributions, which would make it difficult to establish trustworthiness and reciprocity among ethical consumers’ themselves. Thus, in general consumer activists’ grappled with an intimidating set of collective action problems.

Of course, collective action theorists have identified a range of solutions, the majority of which consumer activists’ employed as well. We can condense these into three broad categories: providing selective incentives, appealing to values, and designing institutions that provide incentives or codify values. Selective incentives take a range of forms, from rewarding those that participate to punishing those who fail to do so (Olson 1965:51). Such incentives can involve money or social status (Sandler 1992:58-60). But they can also promise good fortune or threaten harm (Oliver 1980). I will allude to some of the selective incentives employed by consumer activists below. Whereas selective incentives focus on individual benefits, appeals to values attempt to draw people in by suggesting a shared stake or concern in collective action. In sociological literature on social movements, such appeals to values come under the heading of framing. Frequently, activists’ deploy collective action frames strategically to mobilize joint action (Johnston and Noakes 2005; Tarrow 1992). In accordance with Snow et. al’s classic statement, frames can appeal to existing values (frame bridging) or in extreme cases they can attempt to replace old values with new ones (frame transformation) (1986:467,473).

For instance, turn-of-the-twentieth century consumer activists' appealed broadly to people's sympathies with unseen or ignored laborers. Finally, institutional design can define the context in which participation becomes more likely. Olson argued that large groups could facilitate participation via federated organizational structures and compulsory membership (1965:74-76). While I do not address these explicitly, the N.C.L., C.W.S., and the Women's Guild made use of this federated structure to make ethical purchasing more likely. In each of these cases, collective action was a problem because people lacked sufficient reasons to act collectively. Each solution to the collective action problem suggested a conditional, probabilistic claim: if one provided the right reasons—be they incentives or values—then more people on average would participate in the cause.

But the issue of consumers' consistent coordination suggests another, underappreciated contributor to collective action problems: weakness of the will. Weakness of the will or *akrasia* refers to a lack of self-control: a person knows what she wants and has the opportunity to choose what she wants, but does not choose it (on this issue, see Davidson 2001:21-42; Elster 1986; Mele 1987; Pettit 2003; Tenenbaum 2007:257-282).<sup>5</sup> When addressing their members, consumer activists' assumed – perhaps rightly, perhaps wrongly – that these members had sufficient reasons to purchase goods ethically; they knew the appropriate course of action to take, but they did not take it. Moreover, the sustained coordination of consumers required members to seek out and demand ethically-made goods. That is, they needed to know the good or right action to

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<sup>5</sup> I do not aim to enter into the philosophical discussion of whether and under what psychological or conceptual conditions weakness of the will is possible. I only argue that consumer activists' confronted the problem of *akrasia*.

seek it out or demand it. As we will see, in addition to employing selective incentives and appealing to values, consumer activists' attempted to transform and bolster members' desire to act on what they already knew.<sup>6</sup> In doing so, they built on conventional solutions to collective action dilemmas – selective incentives and framing especially. But their educational and disciplinary project also aimed to give members' the tools to reject “false economies” and to withstand the temptations of burgeoning consumer societies. It is this aspect of their activism that addressed weakness of the will. These appeals were based on a distinctive and perhaps more difficult to achieve conditional claim: if we could change their desires, then more people on average would participate in the cause. Whereas the first set of solutions supplied reasons to act, the second set of solutions sought to refashion the people that had reasons but had failed to act on them. The right reasons were not sufficient. Consequently, they aimed at people's desires.<sup>7</sup>

One could argue that some people did not really believe in the virtues of ethical purchasing. If that were the case, then it would follow that the problem was not really one of akrasia but rather one of insufficient incentives or lack of commitment to the right values. It is true that members' of the N.C.L., C.W.S., and the Women's Guild were self-critical and that they could acknowledge the limits of ethical purchasing. In the *Co-operative News*, the editor acknowledged that a comprehensive solution to the problem of

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<sup>6</sup> Also, throughout this chapter I refer to “desires”, which are synonymous with wants. While there is a tendency to conflate desire and passion, especially in studies of consumption, I follow the more general use that makes no assumptions about passion and sexuality. See Swinburne 1986; Elster 2008; Frankfurt 1971

<sup>7</sup> By making this distinction between tactics that supply reasons and those that aimed to refashion character, we can consider an obstacle to certain forms of collective action that has been downplayed – the failure to act in accordance with what one knows to be right or desirable. To distinguish these kinds of tactics clearly, one must evaluate them with reference to the character of the collective action. In general, I suspect that more individualistic collective action will tend to aim at refashioning the soul. But ultimately I see these tactics as continuous rather than diametrically opposed.

sweatshops required legal action: “it is evident that further and more drastic legislation...is sadly needed before the problem [of sweating] can be seriously tackled.”<sup>8</sup> Florence Kelley observed that “without legislation, a living wage or even a lasting minimum wage cannot be assured to women, and minors.”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, it would be false to assume that all members were equally committed to the cause of ethical purchasing. However, co-operators’ in particular confronted problems that were not reducible to lack of incentive or a lack of identification with the cause. In short, the problem was not simply insufficient reason to act collectively. Rather, they had to counter members’ bouts of akrasia or weakness of the will by transforming or disciplining individual desires. NCL members encountered this problem as well, but rarely as distinct from that of insufficient reasons. Thus, I will show that weakness of the will presents distinctive collective action problems for organizations that distinguish members from non-members clearly.

#### Attempts to Secure Consistent Ethical Purchasing

Consumer activists’ confronted the twin problems of supplying people with reasons to act collectively and securing their consistent coordination as consumers (an akratic problem). Co-operators and NCL members alike encountered both of these problems. But the central role of the store in co-operative life created an opportunity for co-operators to obsess over the akratic problem of transforming members’ desires. The store allowed co-operators’ to collect information and stories about who shopped there regularly and who did not. And these features of the store provided co-operators with leverage in their attempts to transform people’s desires. For instance, when co-operators

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<sup>8</sup> “Tailoring and Sweating”, *Co-operative News*, 10/12/1907, p. 1410

<sup>9</sup> “Report of the Secretary”, *National Consumers’ League Annual Report, 1914-1917*, Reel 4, Slide 335

dealt with inconsistent ethical purchasing, they developed an elaborate discourse about which members were loyal to the store. By contrast, when NCL members' dealt with inconsistent ethical purchasing, they cast the problem as organizational. To be sure, both Co-operators and NCL activists attempted to transform people's desires via education. But the Co-operators made use of store-based disciplinary tactics while NCL activists could not. Consequently, we can identify weakness of the will as a distinctive problem for the efforts of co-operators. For NCL activists', weakness of the will was bound up with the more common collective action problem of insufficient reason to act jointly.

a) Reasons to Co-operate: Incentives and Values

The C.W.S. and the Women's Guild supplied a range of incentives to join the co-operative movement. Most notably, the C.W.S. provided dividends on members' purchases in the store. Additionally, they sometimes shamed "bad" consumers and valorized "good" ones. At the same time, co-operators appealed to shared values, engaging in what Snow et. al (1986) refer to as frame bridging and frame amplification. They reminded people of the connections between co-operative values and contemporary socio-political issues as well as clarified how co-operative values mattered to very specific issues.

When it came to incentives, the co-operatives were able to leverage the store to supply positive reasons for buying co-operative goods. Being a co-operative member required that one pay an initial fee, usually around one pound. Because this was a steep price, especially for many prospective co-operative members, the Co-ops allowed members to pay the fee incrementally. Alternatively, members could allocate their

quarterly dividend toward the membership fee. Dividends came from the profits earned by co-operative stores and were returned to members in proportion to the amount of trade one did at the store in question. If one shopped more frequently at the co-operative store, one would receive a larger dividend. Consumers were the owners of the co-operative stores and as such all profits were redistributed to them. In order to distribute these profits, the Co-operative Stores kept ledgers with a record of each member's purchases. These ledgers could be used to calculate the dividend for each member. Non-members were of course welcome to shop at the stores, but they could not receive the dividends.

In general, status based incentives for consumers took both positive and negative forms: indicting bad consumers and valorizing good ones. Co-operators offered plenty of disdain for those who wasted their money. These were the bad consumers. The Women's Co-operative Guild often condemned inappropriate consumption, from trading with credit (which encouraged wastefulness) to pursuing the latest fashions. In one especially scathing indictment of women dressed inappropriately for the rain, one Guild member wrote,

There can be no real comfort, only an indulgence of morbid vanity, in parading garments unsuitable for the streets, the lanes, or the fields...It may be taken for granted that the outer garb is the sign of the inward woman, and the more general...society at large inculcates this form of appraisal, the sooner will women as a whole learn common sense in dress, and cease to make themselves obnoxious when storms arise to replenish the earth.<sup>10</sup>

But the ignorant consumer did worse than make a fool of herself – she also poisoned the world around her. The *Co-operative News* reviewed a book on the ethics of citizenship

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<sup>10</sup> "Rational Dress for Rain", *Co-operative News*, 07/25/1891, pp. 757-758

and endorsed the author's stern condemnation of the ignorant consumer: "it is but half the world's offence that it so greedily pursues the luxuries that are frivolous or vicious, the other half is that it fails to pursue, *because it has yet to learn* to value those that are honest, true, lovely, and of good report."<sup>11</sup> I elaborate on these indictments of bad consumers below, especially members' who were unfaithful to the store.

The positive incentives were often bound up with framing strategies. Co-operative publications were an abundant source of framing strategies premised on an appeal to shared values. One way appealed to the value and values of co-operation as well as the legacies of earlier co-operators. A co-operator identified a tension between co-operation and individualism, insisting on the virtue of co-operative ideals: "From an exhortation to save his soul, down to a recommendation concerning the purchase of his boots, we dwell upon the personal consequences which will ensue from a given line of conduct."<sup>12</sup> The consequences were personal and the concern was to remind co-operative members of their values the author assumes, animated their decision to join a co-operative society.<sup>13</sup> Similarly broad appeals to the membership peppered national and co-operative publications.<sup>14</sup> At one co-operative meeting, one member identified as Mr. Scott, noted,

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<sup>11</sup> "Luxuries", Professor Maccunn, *Co-operative News*, 08/11/1894, pp. 906-907

<sup>12</sup> "Co-operative Education." W.C. Jones. *Co-operative News*, 05/23/1885. p. 445

<sup>13</sup> I focus on values not as an explicit motive for action, but rather on the appeals that co-operators made to their members in attempts to drum up support for the co-operative movement. After all, it is likely that a good number of co-operators joined and remained members less for ideological reasons than for the practical benefit of a quarterly dividend (see Gurney 1996). Co-operators themselves recognized this tension and lamented the tyranny of the 'divi.'

<sup>14</sup> These appeals to members were often couched in terms of education. The Co-operative Wholesale Society and the Women's Co-operative Guild in particular called upon local branches to educate both the broader public (non-members) and store members. See "Education and Social Progress", P. Briggs, *Co-operative News*, 1895, p. 623; "Co-operation and Education II", Geraldine Hodgson, Women's Corner, *Co-operative News*, 07/04/1891, p. 673. Both call upon active co-operators to educate people to "take an intelligent interest in their surroundings", such that they will be compelled by these values to commit or recommit themselves to co-operation.

“...through the Wholesale [C.W.S.] the producer and the consumer are one.” The goal, as he understood it, was to join the supply chain (co-operative industries) to the demands and needs of various co-operative stores and societies.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, co-operators hammered home the relevance of co-operative values in their discussions of political and social issues. An account of the 1895 budget surplus concluded with a need for co-operators make their voices and values known lest “the side of the interests” unduly influence the budget debate.<sup>16</sup> When the war broke out in 1914, co-operators tied contemporary food shortages to co-operative policies of “fairness to all.” Thus they recalled co-operative values while simultaneously suggesting paths of co-operative action that realized these values.<sup>17</sup>

Often, co-operators appealed to sacred values in concert with personal incentives. Even here, we can begin to see the significance of the store in supplying reasons for collective action. The Manchester and Salford Monthly Herald Equitable Society included a plea for members to remain true to their store “BECAUSE it is their own, its objects are to secure the social, intellectual, and material advancement of its members, ...it is teaching working men self-help, or how to manage their own affairs” among numerous other high-minded ethical reasons.<sup>18</sup> These reasons were both practical and normative: “co-operators have not sufficiently impressed on the public the wholesome effects of store discipline in: (1) cutting members adrift from debt...;(2) enabling them

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<sup>15</sup> “The Duty of the Store to the Wholesale”, *Co-operative News*, 07/04/1891, p. 678.

<sup>16</sup> “The Next Budget”, *Co-operative News*, 01/19/1895, p. 60

<sup>17</sup> “Co-operators and the National Crisis: Appeal to Co-operators”, Eleanor Barton, *Co-operative News*, 08/08/1914 p. 1027; “To the Co-operators of Great Britain and Ireland”, T. Goodwin, *Co-operative News*, 8/15/1914, p. 1053

<sup>18</sup> “Why Members Should Stick to their Co-operative Society”, *Manchester and Salford Monthly Herald Equitable Society*, Nov. 1902, Vol. XIV, No. 168, p. 188

automatically to live within their income; (3) implanting a feeling of increasing independence; (4) encouraging a taste for genuine products; (5) giving thrift fresh outlets; (6) bringing untrained persons in contact with trained, and teaching them to take some part in the management of a business embracing shopping and importing and, (7) in generally enlarging the individual view of life and duty.”<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, co-operators appealed to the ethical duties of the co-operative store to give members’ reasons to shop there. In this vein, co-operators encountered a problem that followed from the co-operative principle of non-coercion. This principle was evident in co-operators’ support for Free Trade and their criticisms of traders’ attempts to boycott co-operatives. The Co-operative Wholesale Society pursued this principle, in a limited sense, in local store policies as well. While stores were encouraged to stock many co-operative goods, local store managers were free to purchase goods from any distributor, not just co-operative industries. Co-operators were involved in the production of boots, for instance, but the stores were not required to stock co-operatively branded boots. Thus, the advertisements that populated the *Co-operative News* as well as local co-operative publications were directed at both co-operative store managers and co-operative consumers. If the stores were to stock co-operative goods, and of course most did, it was up to the store managers or employees to demonstrate the extent to which the “necessaries of life” could be acquired through the co-op.”<sup>20</sup> The overwhelming collection of advertisements for co-operative goods in local co-operative monthlies is a

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<sup>19</sup> “The Store Discipline”, *Co-operative News*, 03/02/1898. p. 278

<sup>20</sup> “Consumption by Co-operative Societies of Goods Co-operatively Made.” *Co-operative News*. 1893. p. 90

testament to the range of goods available to consumers.<sup>21</sup> The Manchester and Salford Equitable Society capitalized on (and in part constructed) changing desires, from holidays to the turning seasons. They called attention to “Summer Delicacies” such as “tinned Apricots” and holiday specialties such as pancakes for Shrove Tuesday.<sup>22</sup> Such an attitude recognizes the fact that co-operative stores needed to compete with non-co-operative shops, even for the business of co-operative members. In such instances, the balance of responsibility for remaining faithful to the co-operative movement rested upon the stores themselves. Consumers—both members and the public—needed to be convinced of the benefits of co-operation again and again. And these appeals required the desires and appetites of co-operators as consumers.

These incentives and framing strategies offered people reasons to co-operate, from personal financial gain and social improvement to the avoiding sanctions and receiving praise. Moreover, these framing strategies admitted a central concern for co-operators: that many members did not consistently purchase their goods through the store. Such a concern could mean at least two different things. First, co-operators could assume that lapsed members needed more and better reasons to co-operate. And the persistence of co-operative attempts to supply incentives as well as appeal to sacred

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<sup>21</sup> The December issues of the Manchester and Salford Equitable Monthly are a spectacle of consumer desire, with advice for purchasing Christmas presents and meals. These advertisements were not secluded in disparate text boxes or set aside from the body. Rather, they appeared in the body of the text itself with headings such as: “Buying Christmas Presents” and “Where are Those Puddings?” One section entitled “A Beautiful Custom” even advocates that English co-operators leave some food out for birds, after describing a Norse custom advocating concern for birds in winter. *Manchester and Salford Monthly Herald*, November and December 1900.

<sup>22</sup> Shrove Tuesday marks the Tuesday before Lent begins in the Christian calendar. Examples of the advertisements, which are plentiful, can be found in any edition of the local co-operative publications. For these specific examples, see *Manchester and Salford Monthly Herald Equitable Society*, January 1902, Vol. XIV, No. 157.

values via framing confirms this interpretation. Second, co-operators could assume that lapsed members needed to be transformed as people. After all, members' had plenty of reasons to co-operate and they had already sufficient access to the incentives and purposes of co-operation. These two approaches suggest distinctive kinds of obstacles to collective action. The former suggests the problem of knowing and desiring the virtues of ethical purchasing. The latter suggest the problem of know and desiring the virtues of ethical purchasing but failing to do so. I pursue this question by looking more closely at co-operators' tactics for securing consistent ethical purchasing among their members.

#### b) When Reasons Fail: Disciplining and Transforming Co-operators' Desires

In the face of consumer temptation, co-operators worried about the weakness of members' wills. Some of the familiar tactics such as status incentives and appeals to sacred values addressed this problem as well. But in addition co-operators' sought to discipline and transform members' individual capacities to desire. They attempted to teach members to pursue what they already knew they should do. These appeals did not just supply reasons to purchase goods ethically, but attempted to strengthen members' resolve by disciplining and transforming their capacities to desire – to give members' the strength to pursue what was right in spite of temptation. We can see this distinctive issue in the way that co-operators' defined and sought to resolve members' weakness of the will.

One member of the Women's Co-operative Guild pointed to the problem of akrasia when discussing the role of advertising. She write, "the ordinary purchaser, even if she be a co-operator, requires a great deal of strengthening against the urgency of

advertisements.” She proceeds with the following imaginative effort: “Suppose you are told that a certain soap takes away all sense of effort from the process of scrubbing, or that it gives the complexion of a child of six to a woman of fifty. You do not literally believe what you are told—you all for the picturesequeeness of statement. But unless you are a very cynical or experienced character indeed, it is almost impossible not to believe that...the soap of which such things be said must be a good soap, and that you may safely put it on your face.”<sup>23</sup> The author forgave transgressions against co-operative products and principles by store members who could be lured, against their wishes, to stray from the store and co-operative products. Thus, co-operative advertisements were one persistent attempt to counter the insidious effects of popular advertisements. These co-operative advertisements promised wholesome goods and reminded co-operators of their duties. A co-operative advertisement in Manchester and Salford noted, “If you are a member of the store, we have no misgivings in making the claim that you should purchase your bread and confectionary at the stores.”<sup>24</sup> These kinds of appeals suggested that co-operative advertisements could strengthen members’ wills by enticing them. The advertisement for co-operative baking continued with a now curiously modest claim, “Did you ever try what we call our ‘Seconds bread’? It is pure, sweet, and wholesome. Some folks say it is equal to that sold as best by other traders. If you will try it, you can form your own opinion.”<sup>25</sup> The advertising that the Co-operatives undertook aimed to strengthen members’ resolve to support the store while appealing their reasonable desire

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<sup>23</sup> “Educating the Purchaser”, *Co-operative News*, 1898. p. 802

<sup>24</sup> “Where We Get Our Bread”, *Manchester and Salford Herald*, Vol. XIII, No. 150, May 1901, p. 88

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

for nice things. These kinds of appeals suggested that the capacity for sustained ethical purchasing required some of the incentives commonly used by other advertisers.

This concern about weakness of the will manifests itself in co-operators' longstanding suspicions of advertising as well. Thus co-operators' distinguished between advertisements that, under my description, strengthened and weakened one's will. Even when co-operators made the case that advertising and propaganda were important, they did so with caution. A believer in advertising felt compelled to ask, "Should Co-operators Societies Advertise?"<sup>26</sup> While the writer answered the question affirmatively, the need to pose the question reveals the underlying suspicion of advertising. But co-operators were suspicious of particular advertisements that short-circuited one's ability to reason. In the proud words of the Manchester and Salford Society president, "co-operation is not popular, except among the independent and industrious."<sup>27</sup> But the advertisements themselves were often couched amid long descriptions of the goods as well as their origins. One lengthy description of C.W.S. Jam bears this out: "Have you ever tried [C.W.S. Jams]? We advise you to give them a trial. They are produced in one of the best-equipped factories in England...Try them, and form your own opinion."<sup>28</sup> In this way, co-operators' sought to distinguish their advertisements from others. As one co-operator wrote, "Business is now fought for as never before, specious inducements of every kind being put forward to trap the unwary...Never before than was it necessary to educate the ordinary co-operative member to the real consciousness of the worth, desirability, and

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<sup>26</sup> "Time and Trade: Should Co-operative Societies Advertise?" *Co-operative News*, 09/04/1909, p. 1140

<sup>27</sup> "What is Co-operation?", *Manchester and Salford Herald*, Vol. XIII, No. 153, (August 1901), p. 134

<sup>28</sup> "C.W.S. Jams", *Manchester and Salford Herald*, Vol. XIII, No.156 (November 1901), p. 182

necessity of the co-operative movement.”<sup>29</sup> Advertisements could “trap the unwary” or “educate.” They could weaken wills in face of urgent and specious appeals or they could strengthen wills through co-operative education. Such distinctions resulted in modest and sometimes awkward attempts to educate members and the general public. Moreover, these educational efforts suggested that co-operators faced a problem of transforming individual desires.

Co-operative publications were filled with stories of “wise consumption,” thrift, and “false economies.” All were attempts to transform members’ desires through education and discipline. A “false economy” referred to the self-defeating pursuit of cheapness as an end in itself. For instance, co-operators lamented as “pitiable” those who “allow their membership to lapse, thus sacrificing all the savings of the past, and throwing themselves into a helpless position[.]”<sup>30</sup> “Wise consumption” meant knowing how to “get good value for [one’s] money.”<sup>31</sup> “Good value” referred not simply to cheapness in the present but that which would remain useful in the future and would bolster the community by supporting wholesome work. To encourage these virtuous desires, co-operators turned to education as civilizing influence. Education would “uplift” members and secure them against the false temptations of bargains. As “citadels of thrift”, co-operative societies reminded members that “thrift is not merely material...Side by side with the money saving stands the uplifting and mental training of the members first in organization and commercial dealing, but hardly second in the study of social problems, the working out of their own social salvation, and the fulfillment of the

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<sup>29</sup> “Time and Trade: Should Co-operative Societies Advertise?” *Co-operative News*, 09/04/1909, p. 1140

<sup>30</sup> “Lapses of Thrift”, *Co-operative News*, 05/18/1899, p. 262.

<sup>31</sup> “Wise Consumption”, *Co-operative News*, 11/04/1899, p. 1216

longing, yearning, striving for the mental good which their fathers comprehended.”<sup>32</sup> Participation in the co-operative societies, with the encouragement of active co-operators, consumers stood to gain a discipline and a moral education.

But these efforts to transform members’ desires suffused more than co-operative advertisements and treatises. Commonly, co-operative publications drew direct attention to co-operative infidelity and store discipline as problems of insufficient, if understandable lack of self-control. Without indicting individual members, these complaints struck a personal tone, complete with parables and even disguised personal testimonies of co-operative members’ hypocrisy. There are obvious references to the contradictions between co-operative values and members’ practices. In Manchester, some co-operators followed a local bishop by raising the question of “Preaching and Practice”, noting that “they do not always go together, although every man will admit that they should.” The Bishop gave a sermon on the relations between capital and labor with an emphasis on the ways that co-operative production promotes individual development and service to others. The Co-operators recommended, “You can continue your practicing by purchasing boots, shoes, hosiery, quilts, flannels, shirting, and a thousand other things made by and for co-operators in our drapery, tailoring, and boot departments.”<sup>33</sup> The authors introduced the difficulty of purchasing co-operative goods consistently, but with particular reference to a sermon that would have been familiar to many co-operative members. Thus the appeal struck a more personal and local tone, referring to the comings and goings in the community that co-operators’ ostensibly shared.

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<sup>32</sup> “Citadels of Thrift”, *Co-operative News*, 02/10/1900, p. 138.

<sup>33</sup> “Preaching and Practice”, *Manchester and Salford Monthly Herald Equitable Society*, July 1902, Vol. XIV, No. 164.

But this approach was mild in comparison with some of the more pointed debates that spilled onto the pages of co-operative publications. One co-operator, identified only as T.B., published a letter in the Women's Corner of the *Co-operative News*, condemned flattery, hypocrisy, self-congratulation, and self-deception in the Women's Co-operative Guild. "I often wonder", he wrote, "whether the leaders of the Women's Guild are really as satisfied with their organization as they seem to be...one is afraid that the major portion of guild members are thoughtless and irresponsible women, who have no more regard for co-operation and who do not further its cause to any greater extent than non-members."<sup>34</sup> This unforgiving critique of women's role concluded with an example drawn from the writer's friend: "A friend of mine—a modest, obliging shop man—has told me that some guildswomen have been so unreasonable in their attitude that he has taken off his apron and asked them to take the work out of his hands." He portrays these same women as hunting for bargains outside of the co-operative stores.<sup>35</sup> In this exchange, two male co-operators admonished women for their insufficiently strong will, largely through insinuation. Guild members responded with a series of letters. One called attention to broader akratic problems in the co-operative movement, with a humorous dramatization of a domestic conversation that concluded with the serious punchline: "Unless the stores are loyal, and the Wholesale is loyal, to the broad principles of personal responsibility for the conditions under which the goods they sell are produced, no amount of blind loyalty on the part of the guildswomen will make co-operation truly

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<sup>34</sup> "Plain Talk", T.B. Women's Corner, *Co-operative News*, 07/06/1906, p. 814.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 814; As was common throughout this time period, the co-operative stores were often arranged so that only managers and employees had direct access to the goods for sale – thus, the manager's frustrated attempt to turn his apron over to the dissatisfied customers.

great.”<sup>36</sup> The author lampooned T.B.’s scapegoating the Women’s Guild when the men in charge of co-operative stores and societies were not themselves consistent in purchasing goods produced under conditions of which co-operators approved. A week later T.B. replied, this time softening his claim, but continuing to press his initial question about fidelity to co-operative principles among co-operators in general, not just women.<sup>37</sup> This exchange dramatizes a tension between the Women’s Co-operative Guild and the male-dominated C.W.S. But in addition, it reveals the extent to which co-operators drew upon local forms of discipline to address the consistency with which members shopped at co-operative stores—especially when dealing with women.

These attempts to discipline members’ desires were more than rhetorical appeals. When the co-operators wanted to increase demand for co-operative goods, they relied on the store managers and employees. But they also used co-operative conferences and local co-operative meetings to remind others of co-operative values and the virtues of co-operative goods. Members of the Women’s Co-operative Guild engaged with co-operative stores to establish strategies for marketing and stocking co-operative goods.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the Women’s Guild structured their local meetings around demonstrations of co-operative goods. Co-operative tea, cocoa, biscuits, and other items were served along with discussions of co-operative projects and lectures on contemporary social issues.<sup>39</sup> The Guild always advocated “co-operative productions,” and “the education of

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<sup>36</sup> “The Guild and its Teachings”, Women’s Corner, *Co-operative News*, 07/21/1906.

<sup>37</sup> “T.B. Replies”, Women’s Corner, *Co-operative News*, 07/28/1906, p. 907.

<sup>38</sup> 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Report of the Women’s Co-operative Guild, April. 1900-01, pp. 7-8.

<sup>39</sup> For example, Guild members in Derby and Darwen hosted a “Cocoa Night”, wherein participants sampled co-operative-produced cocoa and discussed its origins. See the 22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Report of the Women’s Co-operative Guild, April 1904-June 1905, pp. 13-14.

members as co-operators [was] carried on by lectures, addresses, papers, and discussions[.]”<sup>40</sup> Both the Co-operative Wholesale Society and the Women’s Co-operative Guild also encouraged “Co-operative Shopping Weeks,” wherein “the idea is to spend as much money as we possibly can at our own store during the next week...and to buy as far as possible only such goods as are made in co-operative workshops under co-operative conditions.”<sup>41</sup> On the one hand, these projects appealed to members’ tastes and desires, encouraging them to appreciate the sensual delights and practical uses of co-operative goods. On the other hand, these projects worked through the very community that it seeks to generate. They depended on the implicit and explicit pressures of members on each other to develop a taste for and to purchase co-operative products. In this sense, then, co-operative education involved an appeal to local communities to discipline the tastes and desires of co-operators.

Co-operators employed these tactics to transform and discipline members’ desires. As such, co-operators provided incentives and appealed to co-operative values – among them thrift, loyalty, and social progress. Crucially, they also used interpersonal sanctions to discipline members’ desires. These sanctions and appeals indicated the weakness of the will as a central obstacle to co-operation. While they drew upon some familiar tactics for overcoming collective action problems, co-operators also set themselves a much more difficult task: producing people who were less susceptible to the temptations of consumer culture. These tactics for overcoming weakness of the will called upon co-operators to straddle the line between “traditional” condemnations of

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<sup>40</sup> “21<sup>st</sup> Annual Report of the Women’s Co-operative Guild, April 1903-04

<sup>41</sup> “Our Shopping Week”, Women’s Corner, *Co-operative News*, 03/25/1911, p. 373; “The Co-operative Shopping Week”, *Co-operative News*, 03/11/1911, p. 298

desire (Horowitz 1985) and more sympathetic efforts to understand desire. Most importantly, these appeals show that co-operative education and discipline ambitiously sought to change not just incentive structures, but co-operative desires.

#### National Consumers' League

The National Consumers' League confronted similar obstacles to collective action – both the problem of insufficient reasons to be a consistent ethical consumer and the problem of having reasons but failing to act on them. However, their responses to these problems were structured by organizational differences. Most notably, the NCL did not provide or sell ethical goods themselves. Thus, while the co-operators' were able to draw on the store as a tool for providing incentives, transformation, and discipline, NCL activists' lacked such a resource. As such, they drew less rigid distinctions between members and non-members. For the NCL, the question of supplying reasons was more closely bound up the question of strengthening consumers' will to purchase ethically. They sought to transform people's desires via general educational projects and, to a much lesser extent than the co-operators', employed disciplinary pressure on individual consumers. In general, the NCL relied heavily on framing strategies and rather than incentives or disciplinary tactics to overcome obstacles to collective action. Thus, while weakness of the will was certainly relevant to the National Consumers' League, they relied mainly on generic educational tactics, appeals to shared values, and incentives to transform and discipline consumers' desires. By contrast, co-operators were able to draw on store-related information and interactions in their attempts to discipline wayward consumers.

c) Reasons to be an ethical consumer as transformation of desire

Like Co-operators, the NCL offered incentives for becoming ethical consumers. They appealed to widely-shared values and explained these values in light of contemporary events. They also provided negative incentives by stressing the possible harms of thoughtless purchasing – especially threats to one’s health. These appeals gave people reasons to become ethical consumers and members of the NCL. Unlike the Co-operators, the NCL efforts to transform and discipline consumers’ desires were bound up with these incentives and appeals to shared values. The NCL lacked strong reasons to distinguish members from non-members. As we will see, many referred broadly to the purchasing public even when referring to members in particular. Moreover, the NCL did not accumulate the same kinds of stories and information about consumers. Consequently, NCL attempts to supply reasons for ethical purchasing and their attempts to transform consumers’ desire were effectively similar.

NCL leaders were aware that any broad scheme of ethical purchasing required mass participation. As Florence Kelley noted, “The Consumers’ Leagues need numbers. It can never be a movement of the educated few. A small minority, however intelligent, conscientious, influential and wealthy, cannot wholly control the shopping situation.”<sup>42</sup> The NCL project was to educate the public, including members, to become ethical consumers. Usually, members of the NCL attributed relatively low rates of participation to unthinking publics and a lack of awareness. In this, they did not make hard and fast distinctions between members and non-members. As one member of the Worcester

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<sup>42</sup> Fourth Annual Report of the National Consumers’ League, 03/04/1903, Reel 3, Slide 483

Consumers' League wrote, "If an unthinking public make it necessary for this demoralizing system [sweatshop labor] to continue, the first essential is to educate the public to a sense of its responsibility."<sup>43</sup> For the most part, NCL members referred to the general problem of educating the purchasing public, not the specific problem of securing consistent participation from members. But the problem of *akrasia* lurked in much of the League propaganda. In the words of a New Jersey member, "This is an educational movement to teach us to want right things, rightly made, and the responsibility lies not without us, but within ourselves, heedful of the power we possess."<sup>44</sup> According to Florence Kelley, "The League now renders it easy for purchasers to select with knowledge of the circumstances. We can have cheap underwear righteously made and clean; or, we can have cheap underwear degradingly made and unclean. Henceforth, we are responsible for our choice."<sup>45</sup> Knowledge of the circumstances made consumers' aware of their responsibility, which also meant that they could fail to live up to this responsibility. Even in the discussions leading up to the formation of the NCL, people recognized that weakness of the will would be an obstacle: "Can we increase the number of those who recognize and accept a definite responsibility and assist them to do their buying in ways that may benefit alike the producer and distributor?"<sup>46</sup> The problem was not just recognizing and accepting responsibility, but consistent ethical purchasing.

Thus, a sense of responsibility secured via appeals to values *without* an accompanying organization was insufficient. Florence Kelley elaborated on this by

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<sup>43</sup> "Local Reports", Fourth Annual Report of the National Consumers' League, Reel 3, Slide 502

<sup>44</sup> Report of the Consumers' League of New Jersey, Third Annual Report of the National Consumers' League, Reel 3, Slide 504

<sup>45</sup> "Report of the Secretary", Second Annual Report of the National Consumers' League, p. 12

<sup>46</sup> Report of the Executive Committee, February 2, 1898, Reel 16, Slide 72

showing how knowledge alone would not suffice to bring about a meaningful transformation in production practices. An acquaintance of Kelley's in Chicago, "[d]eeply stirred by an eloquent appeal in behalf of the sweaters' victims and their sufferings, she determined to free her own conscience by buying only goods made in factories."<sup>47</sup> By drawing attention to the eloquent appeal that stirred the conscience, Kelley admitted that the NCL's appeals were capable of shaping desire and providing a means through which this desire could be effective. Her acquaintance sought to secure information about the production of goods sold in local department stores, but received unsatisfactory platitudes from the salespeople and no written confirmation that all of their goods were free from the taint of sweatshop labor. Kelley concluded, "Her plight well illustrates the case of the individual consumer, enlightened but unorganized and, therefore, ineffectual."<sup>48</sup> This woman, alone with her conscience and lacking sufficient organization of the kind that the Consumers' League could supply, was unable to make her wishes felt.

NCL members were concerned to educate consumers and to give them a practicable outlet to address their sense of responsibility. The desires to give people reasons to consume ethically and to transform people's desires suffused League campaigns. John Graham Brooks described the Consumers' League as "an education of

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<sup>47</sup> "Aims and Principles of the Consumers' Leagues", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 5, No. 3, p. 291; Kelley contrasts goods made in factories, to those made partly or completely in tenements. This was a kind of home work, wherein pieces processed in factories were then assembled in tenements and other "sweat shops." Thus for Kelley and other consumer activists, goods made in a factory were more reputable because their labor conditions could be publicly scrutinized.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, "Aims and Principles", p. 291

our economic desires as these pass into purchases.”<sup>49</sup> These campaigns were appealed to widely-shared values of fairness and justice that would allow people to appreciate their responsibilities as consumers. In this vein, the League undertook a campaign to shop early for Christmas. This Christmas campaign was a successful example of their appeals to the better natures and desires of wealthier women. It was an attempt to mitigate the Christmas shopping rush, which League members disliked because it resulted in longer hours for clerks in department stores and delivery boys. One member of the Illinois Consumers’ League described the League’s earliest attempts: “an open letter was sent to five hundred clergymen and to the presidents of the women’s clubs in and around Chicago...This letter urged shoppers to adopt a few simple rules, the observance of which would improve the hard conditions of those who must serve.”<sup>50</sup> What were these rules? The local boards of Consumers’ League sent circulars with the following advice: “To try not to leave their shopping until the week before Christmas; to try not to shop after 6 p.m.; to try not to receive packages delivered after 6 p.m.”<sup>51</sup> In addition to these simple acts, though, the League also recommended that members should make their actions known to store management and owners, lest they think this shift in demand was arbitrary. In this campaign, League members drew upon the connections and reputation of wealthier, more notable members, whose individual consumption would count for more in these specific instances.

Frequently, these attempts to educate the public involved appeals to values that NCL members thought would be widely shared. Members of the Consumers’ League

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<sup>49</sup> “The Consumers’ League”, John Graham Brooks, 1900, p. 33

<sup>50</sup> “State Reports: Illinois”, Second Annual Report of the National Consumers’ League, p. 17.

<sup>51</sup> “State Reports: Kentucky”, Third Annual Report of the National Consumers’ League, p. 33.

sought to would have agreed with President Theodore Roosevelt, who wrote to NCL member Maud Nathan: “You are doing work that should appeal peculiarly to every good citizen, for those you befriend are greatly in need of friends and are not powerful enough to stand up for themselves.”<sup>52</sup> One member of the Child Labor section, tasked with investigating the extent of child labor, stated, “The people of the United States do not desire to have their work done by children.”<sup>53</sup> Consequently, NCL members interpreted specific political and social issues in light of these shared values. In 1912, the League attempted to publicize the issue of prison-made goods, many of which were not labeled as prison-made. In her account of league work, Florence Kelley wrote, “The general public is at present, but imperfectly awake to the extent and sinister importance of the products thrown upon the market by public prisons and private places of incarceration supported wholly or partly by public funds.”<sup>54</sup>

While the NCL could not offer monetary incentives to become an ethical consumer, they attempted to provide some incentives, especially negative ones. NCL members provided negative incentives by cautioning consumers against threats posed by unclean consumer goods to their health. One comical but revealing example came in a story about ice cream peddlers, “Many of us have watched small children on a hot summer’s day eating with evident enjoyment ice cream sandwiches bought from street peddlers, with a feeling of trepidation and wonder how many germs and how much dirt

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<sup>52</sup> Seventh Annual Report of the National Consumers’ League, Reel 3, Slide 681

<sup>53</sup> “Report of the Child Labor Section”, Sixth Annual Report of the National Consumers’ League, Reel 3, Slide 561

<sup>54</sup> “Secretary’s Report”, Thirteenth Annual Report of the National Consumers’ League, Reel 4, Slide 128

were swallowed with the mouthful of cool pink cream.”<sup>55</sup> But League publications offered much more pointed descriptions of threats to consumers’ health. The Consumers’ League of New York City published a pamphlet filled with photos of tenement labor which included the text: “Do you realize that “home-work” means overwork and underpay, child labor and truancy, the spread of infection far and wide?”<sup>56</sup> When describing the conditions of tenement life and work, NCL members alluded to the ever-present specter of disease and infection. In a 1905 description of Newark, New Jersey tenements, NCL member Elisabeth Butler wrote, “In a hundred houses where factory work is done, there have been since January 1st, 1903, 11 cases of scarlet fever, 16 of, diphtheria, 2 of cerebro-spinal meningitis, 6 of typhoid fever and 10 of tuberculosis. The actual number of cases of tuberculosis is probably much greater, but as this disease is not reportable in New Jersey, and as the death-book of the Board of Health records only the place of death, frequently a hospital, and not the residence, it is impossible to ascertain the total number of houses in which there is a tuberculosis patient.”<sup>57</sup> She continued with a description of particular houses and noted signs of a tuberculosis case: “All last summer the husband had little work, and to buy rent and food it was necessary that the wife help. A button factory was near, and for months she carded buttons at two cents a gross; sometimes her 4-year-old daughter helped her, and they could usually make two gross an hour. The largest weekly sum that she made was \$2. Before her husband began to work steadily again the heavy weight of boxes which she carried back and forth from the

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<sup>55</sup> Sixth Annual Report of the National Consumers’ League, Reel 3, Slide 624

<sup>56</sup> *Children Who Work in the Tenements*, The Consumers’ League of the City of New York, September 1908.

<sup>57</sup> “Factory Work in Newark Homes”, Elisabeth Butler, *Annual Report of the National Consumers’ League, 1905-06*, p. 29

factory, and long hours of bending over her work, had left their mark on her in incipient tuberculosis.”<sup>58</sup> The transmission of disease via commodities threatened those consumers that remained ignorant of contemporary production as well as their responsibilities.

Yet, when the NCL dealt with consumers’ failure to purchase righteous goods, they speculated about the reasons why without raising consumers’ responsibility. These concerns emerged explicitly when members tracked the sales of goods bearing the league label. When the NCL’s Committee on Advertising investigated the sales of labeled goods, they noted labeled goods were not in great demand. “The labeled goods now found on the counters”, they concluded, “are there mainly from economic considerations and not because they bear our label.”<sup>59</sup> In short, many of the goods were selling poorly and it was up to the stores to sell them or lose their investment. This same investigation “also showed that the goods endorsed by our league are mostly of inferior quality such as do not appeal to the class of people from which we have, as yet, largely recruited our membership.”<sup>60</sup> What is notable about this report is not just that it reveals the difficulties that the NCL encountered in encouraging ethical buying. It also reveals the extent to which consumer activists took responsibility for failing to get the word out. Unlike the co-operators, they did not treat the problem as one of members’ inconsistent ethical purchasing.

To address this issue, the committee proposed to “reach other classes of the community through Mothers’ meetings, Teachers’ Educational Association; girls’ clubs;

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 33

<sup>59</sup> “Report of the Committee on Advertising”, 01/27/1904, Reel 16, Slide 157

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

women's clubs, [and] church organizations.”<sup>61</sup> The league was responsible for showing members why they should care about their purchases in virtue of their ethical responsibilities and desires. Because they lacked first-hand information about purchasing patterns, if they were to transform people's desires – which NCL members recognized as necessary – they needed to do so by educating in the broad sense of the term. The first NCL president John Graham Brooks saw the NCL as an educational movement. He wrote, “It is to teach us how to ‘want’ right things, rightly made. It is to teach us the ways through which an ‘organized buying of the best’ reacts upon the worker's life. It is to teach us how to buy, so that the strain, the burden, the squalor of much of the industrial life about us may be diminished.”<sup>62</sup> Members of the NCL thus offered reasons to be an ethical consumer as a pathway to personal transformation.

Although the NCL lacked the ability to track the sales of desirable goods, they did employ some less direct approaches for disciplining consumers' desires. After all, NCL members trumpeted the moral thrust of their activism and knew that instruction in a new morality involved discipline. In Graham Brooks' words, “It cannot be too strongly said, that the real difficulties are not outside of us, in the store, or workshop; the difficulties most to be feared are in ourselves as careless and indifferent buyers. The League is an occasion for our own instruction in this new and much needed morality.”<sup>63</sup> Sometimes NCL members encouraged disciplinary pressure indirectly. While public reports were uncommon, members sometimes hosted sales of ethical goods in their homes. NCL member Louise Lockwood reported that “[o]ne such sale at the home of...Mrs. Frederick

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> The Consumers' League, John Graham Brooks, 1900, p. 33

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 26

Nathan, was well attended, and was followed by a successful one in Harlem under the direction of Mrs. Roantree.”<sup>64</sup> Given the League’s self-consciously moral project, they were happy to allow their message to circulate through the churches. Reports of local leagues drew frequent attention to the league messages as they appeared in Sunday sermons.<sup>65</sup> Florence Kelley’s extensive travel records indicate that she met with religious bodies and voluntary organizations (Women’s Clubs, Individual Clubs, National and State organizations, colleges and schools, parlor meetings, conferences, working people’s groups, and more). For instance, in 1902 Kelley spoke in front of over 100 distinctive groups, not to mention an additional 25 meetings with various Consumers’ Leagues.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, while the League did not rely upon the same explicit community-based discipline as the Co-operatives, they tended to rely on local associations to bring about and sustain ethical purchasing.

Thus, while the NCL brushed up against the problem of weakness of the will, their attempts to address it were for the most part undifferentiated from the reasons for ethical purchasing. From negative incentives such as threats to health and appeals to broadly shared values such as justice, the NCL approached the transformation of desires through their educational efforts to supply people with reasons to become ethical consumers. They relied on local religious and women’s groups to spread the word about NCL campaigns and consequently they did not draw clear distinctions between members and non-members. Moreover, their concerted efforts to discipline individual desires were less pronounced than those of co-operators. This was not because the NCL was somehow

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<sup>64</sup> “Committee on Label”, *The Work of the Consumers’ League of the City of New York*, 1915, p. 37

<sup>65</sup> “Secretary’s Report”, Second Annual Report of the National Consumers’ League, p. 18.

<sup>66</sup> “Meetings”, Third Annual Report of the National Consumers’ League, pp. 33-35

less of a moral project than the Co-operatives, but because of organizational differences in access to information about consumers.

#### Discipline, Akrasia, and Collective Action

Consumer activists' faced two basic obstacles to collective action – the free rider problem and weakness of the will. While the former are commonly acknowledged collective action problems, the latter are less commonly recognized as a distinctive obstacle (for an exception, see Elster 1986). There are several reasons for this. First, the problems associated with weakness of will, namely of disciplining and transforming people's desires, involve significant "intrapersonal" work. By contrast, these kinds of intrapersonal appeals are more difficult to secure than interpersonal ones that supply people with good reasons to act. Second, as the NCL demonstrated, one can attempt to achieve such transformations of desire via supplying reasons. The NCL employed a more limited range of disciplinary tactics than the Co-operatives, but both sought to transform and re-educate desires. Later, I will address what we might learn by paying more attention to weakness of the will as a collective action problem.

While the National Consumers' League, the Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative Guild draw attention weakness of the will as an obstacle to collective action, they defined and responded to the problem differently in light of their organizational structure and insularity, i.e. drawing clear distinctions between members and non-members. Once again, their responses to analogous problems were shaped by group-specific features – especially organizational character. These analogous problems required activists' to address different audiences – this time potential ethical purchasers

but without the mediation of the commodity. Thus, their distinctive engagement with capitalist societies receded into the background while the more specific features of their organization shaped their actions. The relevance of the variables shifted with the character of the problem and the audience addressed by consumer activists. To examine these questions in a different context, I turn next to the catastrophic disruptions of the Great War.

## Chapter 6 – The Great War and Consumer Activism

While the public conflicts with organized business interests or trade unions threatened to surface throughout the period, the First World War forced consumer activists to reconsider their purposes altogether. With new workers—especially women—drawn into men’s position, not to mention declining membership activity (if not necessarily declining membership), declining resources, war profiteering, and other concerns, consumer activists were offered the opportunity to reshape their projects to address new problems and old inefficiencies. Ultimately, the shifting political conditions during the First World War amplified important distinctions between the National Consumers’ Leagues and the Co-operative groups.<sup>1</sup> The National Consumers’ League jettisoned their consumer-centered strategies while they retained their ethical orientation to the consumer and consumer activism. Instead they focused on securing legal and political protections for vulnerable populations such as children and women. However, the NCL did so without aligning with any political parties. By contrast, the Co-operatives turned to politics during the First World War, forming the Co-operative Party in 1917. Furthermore, the Co-operatives retained their consumer-centered strategies and ethical orientations to the consumer.

Once again, by zeroing in on an analogous problem we can ascertain why these activists’ modified and reshaped their repertoires of ethical consumer action. Rather than

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of simplicity, in this chapter I discuss the Women’s Co-operative Guild and the Co-operative Wholesale Society jointly, although these two groups did not always march in lockstep throughout the War. In particular, the Women’s Co-operative Guild came into conflict with the other co-operative groups over the former’s campaign to reform divorce laws. On this issue, see the *32<sup>nd</sup> Annual Report of the Women’s Co-operative Guild*, May 1914-15, p. 5; That said, with respect to the store and ethical purchasing, the Women’s Guild and the Co-operative Wholesale Society tended to work together and to organize around similar issues such as store loyalty, war profiteering, and the power of the co-operative consumer throughout the war.

differences in group characteristics or organizational form, shifts in state policy accentuated differences in Co-operative and Consumers' League missions. To fulfill the goal of protecting vulnerable workers, the National Consumers' League took advantage of a political opportunity to participate in government investigations of shifting labor conditions. Coupled with the fervent protests of organized labor over the use of the NCL label, the League curtailed their consumer-oriented campaigns. To fulfill the goal of protecting working class consumers, the Co-operatives responded to government price controls and taxes by forming a political party. Moreover, state tax policies reinforced the co-operative commitment to consumer-oriented campaigns. It even underscored the radical opposition to capitalist society that was a latent feature of co-operation. In a sense, both the Co-operatives and the National Consumers' League became more themselves: the Co-operative project to transform capitalism as a movement of the working classes gained an explicit political direction and the National Consumers' League reaffirmed their official independence from politics to protect vulnerable populations of workers. Thus, state policies established a context within which different aspects of the Co-operative and NCL missions gained salience.

Obviously, the members of the National Consumers' League experienced the war differently than the members of Co-operatives. At the close of the war, England was in debt to the United States by at least 850 million pounds (Robb 2002; Henig 1995). Thus, I use comparison not to explain why they were different but to illuminate the specific transformations in their campaigns and overall strategy. The war presented challenges to the ethical politics of purchasing that these groups developed throughout the early

twentieth century. The First World War provides an opportunity to explore how changes in political opportunities played a role in the reshaping activists' repertoire of ethical consumerism. Although the desire to reform the labor process and the course of capitalist development remained, activists' paths to these quickly shifted apart. The Co-operatives were encouraged in their radical turn by war profiteers, a special problem for the co-operators as they sold goods directly. These war profiteers cheated the consumer and the nation. Their presence reminded co-operators of the alternate model of demands for ethical purchasing. In the United States, the National Consumers' League remained intransigently nonpartisan. The NCL pursued the problem of women's work further and began to restrict their consumer-directed activism and ethical purchasing projects. Thus, rather than entirely redirect the course of their activism, the political climates of World War I era U.S. and Great Britain accentuated pre-existing differences between the American and English consumer activists. As a spectacularly "unsettled time" (Swidler 2001), the period during the Great War disrupted activists' "settled" interpretations of everyday experiences of capitalist society. Consequently, this encouraged them to rethink their policies and activism in light of their more precise, organizational goals – goals that were themselves grounded in class backgrounds, in particular.

#### The Co-operatives During the War

The Co-operatives were always committed to transforming a capitalist society governed by profit and competition into a communitarian society governed by reason and co-operation. But the First World War resulted in a heightened commitment to co-operative purchasing and amplified co-operators' concerns with the systematic injustices

of capitalism. In particular, the Co-operatives associated systematic food shortages and price gouging with the policies of the British state – not just morally corrupt middlemen. During this period, co-operators affirmed their commitment to ethical purchasing, calling repeatedly on co-operators to remain loyal to the store. At the same time, the co-operative concern with British state policy resulted, finally, in the official co-operative entry into politics.

Sometimes historians have concluded that co-operators' were uninterested in revolutionary transformations and disruptions of capitalism; they claim that co-operation was understood as a system that could co-exist with capitalism (Reid 1992). Such claims are valid, up to a point (Gurney 1996). Co-operators were not revolutionary agitators. Yet among co-operative activists, there does appear to be a basic shift toward systemic indictments of capitalism as fundamentally opposed to co-operation by the beginning of the First World War. A basic example from the *Co-operative News* illustrates this shift in theme and tone. In the late nineteenth century, co-operators railed against middlemen. The editors of the *Co-operative News* began a denunciation of the middleman with this: "If we could believe that the middleman and the hideous clumsiness of his methods were gradually disappearing before the irresistible advance of economic organization we should be glad to avoid such a hackneyed theme."<sup>2</sup> But this discussion of middlemen occurs without an explicit discussion or denunciation of capitalism. Rather, the editors denounced the ethical behavior of middlemen, co-operators, and politicians. In the 1897 article, the editors referred to the moral bankruptcy of middlemen and co-operators who

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<sup>2</sup> "The Middleman Ethically Considered", *The Co-operative News*, 1/16/1897, p. 61

failed to shop faithfully at the Co-operative Stores. They described the capitalist system of production, variously, as “our industrial system”, with allusions to competition, the credit system, industrial syndicates, labor, capital, and orthodox theorists of political economy. In short, they had many ingredients with which to denounce the capitalist system, but they avoided that discussion in favor of ethics and morality. On these grounds, there was no basis upon which to conclude that co-operation and capitalism were opposed. One might just as well have concluded, in so far as co-operation flourished, it involved moral people acting morally. Analogously, one might conclude that, in so far as capitalism flourished, it involved immoral people acting immorally. With this interpretation, a shift in personal ethics would lead to a shift in the economic mode of production, or at least to small islands of co-operation in a sea of competition.

By contrast, in the months leading up to the War, the editors of the *Co-operative News* published a piece called “Co-operation and Capitalism.” Therein, they took issue with the words of Sir Henry Grattan-Bellew, who addressed the Co-operative Congress and made the following statement: “It [co-operation] is no war on capital or the capitalist. It is merely building up for those who wish to join it, a simpler and juster system, to run concurrently with the capitalistic system[.]” The editors responded: “We do not take that view...Co-operation means in its ultimate object the...transformation of the present capitalistic system...Co-operation means the ownership and control of capital investment in production and distribution...on a co-operative basis. Private capitalism does not mean that.”<sup>3</sup> By the beginning of the First World War, capitalism as a system was becoming an

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<sup>3</sup> “Co-operation and Capitalism”, *The Co-operative News*, 6/6/1914, p. 727

explicit co-operative theme. And co-operators portrayed this capitalist system as incommensurable with co-operation.

As I have argued elsewhere, we must understand the work of co-operators as motivated by capitalist institutions intrinsically. Thus, it would be absurd and wrong to claim that Co-operators never discussed capitalism prior to 1914. In fact, the co-operative turn toward “radical” language began in the early years of the new century. Peter Gurney has shown that denunciations of the capitalist system increased in the early years of the century, too.<sup>4</sup> What matters is the attention paid by co-operators to capitalism and co-operation as incompatible ways of life during the war. Moreover, in the context of a major global conflict, food shortages, war profiteering, and the role of the state became signs of a dysfunctional system. To overcome this system required both ethical purchasing and expanded political action, if a co-operative way of life was to triumph. To illustrate this argument, I focus especially on co-operative concerns with war profiteering. War profiteering illuminated the bound up with a capitalist system including the English government—not only as a moral failure of many different individuals. Furthermore, if this was in fact the case, one would expect co-operators to cast their turn to politics as an attempt to address the systemic problems with capitalism.

Throughout the First World War, those on the English home front dealt with a combination of scarce staple goods and rising prices for those available. Co-operators were not alone in denouncing war profiteering (Horne 2000: 187-228). Throughout the

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<sup>4</sup> See Gurney (1996:81-87); Gurney shows that co-operators took issue with political and business interests over policies that inhibited, intentionally or not, co-operative cultural events such as festivals, concerts, and meetings. The article on co-operation and capitalism, discussed above, was published just two months prior to the outbreak of the war.

war, food prices inflated drastically and food shortages intensified to such an extent that there were serious concerns about domestic unrest.<sup>5</sup> The rising cost of living was such a pervasive concern that the English government established a Consumers' Council in 1918. This body, which included members of Co-operatives, trade unions, and women's industrial organizations, marked a turn from the government's trust that a free market would result in stable prices. The Consumers' Council contributed to calls for rationing, which were finally introduced toward the end of the war. Until the Consumers' Council's inquiries into pricing and profiteering, people were forced to line up for hours to purchase staple goods like bread, sugar, milk, and butter at prices that dwarfed pre-war levels by as much as 200 percent (Trentmann 2008:198). Thus, war profiteering was on the lips of many including working-class co-operators.

Always attuned to the poor consumer and exploitative middlemen, co-operators took to the fight against war profiteering with gusto, particularly around staple foods such as milk, butter, sugar, and flour. In one of the first co-operative statements after the War broke out, Thomas Goodwin, the manager of the CWS Bank, called on co-operators in Great Britain and Ireland to "rally to your own movement." The co-operator who hoards goods or withdraws money from the store neglects his or her duty to the movement and the nation: "he becomes a mere selfish individualist, and might as well take a rifle, join the ranks of the enemy, and turn round on his own people."<sup>6</sup> Thus, to patronize non-co-operative merchants undermined the war effort *and* the Co-operative movement. While Goodwin hardly rails against capitalism, he reveals the extent to which co-operative

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<sup>5</sup> The following observations draw on Trentmann (2008) and Hilton (2003)

<sup>6</sup> T. Goodwin, "To the Co-operators of Great Britain and Ireland", *The Co-operative News*, 08/15/1914, p. 1053

activists approached the war already wary of the element of self-preservation that might send co-operators into the arms of middlemen. Such claims often did involve systemic denunciations of capitalism and moral denunciations of capitalists. In a common gesture throughout the War, the *Co-operative News* published article after article announcing that through co-operation, the consumer will gain leverage against “profiteers and private capitalists.”<sup>7</sup> Members of the Women’s Co-operative Guild reminded people of the “Woman with the Basket”, whose shrewdness and intelligence endowed them with the strength to overcome “forces of greed and dishonesty.”<sup>8</sup> The poor consumer, a popular co-operative trope, made appearances throughout the war, too. Once again, the lament had to do with war profiteering and the exploitation of the consumer. In one account, the co-operative editors placed the blame squarely upon producers and consumers for failing to band together in co-operative enterprise: “Producers and consumers have themselves to blame largely for the fact that there are people who still have the power of turning a time of great national sacrifice into a source of abnormal profit-making.”<sup>9</sup>

While war profiteering was a fundamental concern for the co-operators, indifference to the virtues of co-operation by the public and co-operative members plagued co-operators throughout the war. Crucially, the crisis around war profiteering and food prices accentuated co-operative frustrations with the English state and political process. By 1917, with no end to the war in sight, co-operators needed a way to address the systemic character of profiteering—it was not simply a moral problem of individual

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<sup>7</sup> “Who is Saving the Nation?”, *Co-operative News*, 01/23/1915, p. 91.

<sup>8</sup> “Women with the Basket”, Margaret Llewellyn Davies, 1/23/1915, p. 102

<sup>9</sup> “Plundering the Consumer”, *Co-operative News*, 1/30/1915, p. 124; see also “The Burden of the Consumer”, *Co-operative News*, 6/12/1915, p. 802; “The War and Co-operation”, *Co-operative News*, 06/12/1915, p. 812

capitalists, but infected the English state as well. These pressing political issues mingled with co-operators longstanding concerns with the industrial production and consumption—especially the rise of monopoly capitalism.<sup>10</sup> During this period, the English government established a series of eight food commissions to monitor food prices throughout England. Some commissioners, especially in the North-West of England, were concerned that government intervention would be necessary to stave off serious social unrest.<sup>11</sup> One can read co-operator’s frustration with the state and with grasping capitalists in their writings throughout the war, especially from 1917 on. In February of 1917—several months before the Co-operative Congress vote to develop a political wing, a co-operator named Lilian Harris proposed “A Policy of Co-operative Reconstruction.” Amid her call for co-operative unity and a more prominent role for women, Harris claimed that co-operative propaganda required centralized organization and should not be left to individual co-operative societies. She wrote, “and because propaganda has languished, education has languished also. It has been in the main divorced from practice, and has accepted and taught too uncritically orthodox economics, with their capitalist bias[.]” Tellingly, Harris argued that such work required political and municipal action, in addition to the standard attempts to grow the co-operative movement through membership, trade, and capital.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, throughout the war, co-operators pointed to the inadequacy of the government response to these issues of profiteering,

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<sup>10</sup> On the co-operatives at this period, see Gurney (1996). On issues of consumption and consumers, see Hilton (2003); Trentmann (2008); Rappaport (2000); Matthew Hilton (2003)

<sup>11</sup> On the food commissions, see Hilton (2003), pp. 40-50, Gurney (1996: 208-216); Barnett (1985).

<sup>12</sup> Lilian Harris, “A Policy of Co-operative Reconstruction”, *Co-operative News*, 02/17/1917, p. 152

whether through criticisms of the government policies such as the Excess Profits Tax and their inability to staunch war profiteering.<sup>13</sup>

The Excess Profits Tax bears particular consideration because it reveals the extent to which co-operators articulated a vision of co-operative sales and purchasing opposed to capitalist modes of consumption. T.W. Mercer, secretary of the Plymouth Co-operative Society, wrote the following about the Excess Profits Tax and co-operation:

Everyone who has studied our case knows that no such thing as profit exists within the co-operative movement. Profit can be made only by one man, or one set of men, out of other men. We trade with ourselves, and it is impossible for us to make profit out of ourselves. That which our opponents desire to tax us is non-existent.<sup>14</sup>

By treating co-operators like other businesses, the Excess Profits Tax encouraged co-operators to explain what was distinctive about their understanding of consumption, in particular. After all, according to their principles, co-operators trading did not involve profiting off of others. Rather, it entailed an opportunity for members to “save” by investing in the store and receiving a quarterly dividend for his or her investment. Thus,

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<sup>13</sup> Aside from increasing prices on staple goods, co-operators were also unsettled by government policies such as the Excess Profits Tax and even military service tribunals. With respect to the former, the Excess Profits Duty was applied to local co-operative societies as well as private traders. This infuriated co-operators who understood profit as a category of private traders. According to co-operative principles, their local trading surpluses were the property of the co-operative members and the rise of co-operation entailed trade without profit, just a dividend for members. If their earnings were taxed along with the profits of private traders, this reduced co-operation, in effect, to just another business. With respect to the latter, local co-operative societies complained of unfair treatment by those who determined military service. See Tony Adams (1987: 55); see also, “So-Called Excess Profits Taxation”, W.H. Watkins and S.G. Prince, *Co-operative News*, 11/25/1916, p. 1214; “Taxing the Consumer”, *Co-operative News*, 05/12/1917, p. 435 “The Milk Scandal”, *Co-operative News*, 05/27/16, p. 542;; “Those Sugar Cards”, *Co-operative News*, 09/29/1917, p. 931; “The Consumer’s Only Refuge”, *Co-operative News*, Women’s Corner, 12/15/1917, p. 1186; “The Packet Tea Scandal”, *Co-operative News*, 12/04/1915, p. 1597

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Hilson (2002: 14); although the co-operatives in general were hesitant initially to stoke public opposition to the tax, national co-operative organs such as the *Co-operative News* included disparaging articles about the law. See “So-Called Excess Profits Taxation”, W.H. Watkins and S.G. Prince, *Co-operative News*, 11/25/1916, p. 1214; “Taxing the Consumer”, *Co-operative News*, 05/12/1917, p. 435

co-operators could draw attention to taxes levied against the poor consumer, whereas the wealthy escaped and elided further taxation. “The pockets of the poor”, wrote the editor of the *Co-operative News*, “are to render contributions by increased taxes on tobacco, and through the Excess Profits Tax[.]”<sup>15</sup> Thus, the tax was not just because it treated the collective wealth of working (represented by co-operation) as individual wealth.

With the efflorescence of direct criticism of the government, the continued power of capitalist business interests, and food shortages, the co-operators were poised to advocate direct political engagement. While the issue of a co-operative political party had been raised throughout the 1900s, Co-operators could only muster intermittent and capricious support for the notion of a co-operative political party until several years into the War. At the 1917 Co-operative Congress—a joint body of co-operative groups, including the Co-operative Wholesale Society and the Women’s Co-operative Guild—the vote to endorse co-operative political action passed with a resounding 1,979 votes in favor to a mere 201 votes opposed.<sup>16</sup> The co-operative political party did not present

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<sup>15</sup> “Taxing the Consumer”, *Co-operative News*, 05/12/1917, p. 435.

<sup>16</sup> On the Co-operative turn to politics and the significance of World War I, see Robertson (2010); Adams (1987); G.D.H. Cole (1944: 315-317); for an account that claims this shift to politics was motivated by an ideological transformation more than the practical exigencies of the war, see the essays by Sidney Pollard in Briggs and Saville (1972). These interpretations need not be viewed as mutually exclusive. Advocates of the World War I thesis recognize the shifts in co-operative rhetoric and thought around the turn of the century, while advocates of the ideological transformation acknowledge the disruptive effects of the war. It seems that the most plausible interpretation, one that agrees with Hilson (2002) must acknowledge the practical demands of the War as a means of accelerating this inchoate transformation in co-operative thought. Pollard’s interpretation becomes untenable when he claims that the Co-operative turn to politics entailed a “class-based” ideological transformation. This underrates the extent to which activist co-operators viewed themselves as a consumer organization and developed a thoroughgoing critique of monopoly capitalism between 1890 and 1920.

candidates for election until 1918 and, further, did not make much of an electoral impact during the war.<sup>17</sup>

Given their concern with the capitalist business and the state, it is unsurprising that many prominent members of the Women's Co-operative Guild and Co-operative Wholesale Society identified the turn to politics as part of a broader attempt to transform capitalist society through consumers' co-operation. In October 1917, the Co-operatives hosted an emergency political conference to plan their decision to enter English politics. The Women's Co-operative Guild published an account of the conference titled "A Peaceful Revolution", wherein they wrote, "We have learnt that the aim of co-operation is the 'formation of co-operative character and opinions' and 'the training of men and women to take part in industrial and social reforms and *civic life generally*' and from our point of view this specially co-operative character was most marked at the London conference, and is a remarkable testament to the value of co-operative education."<sup>18</sup> Percy Redfern put the issue more pointedly when he provided account of the Co-operative aid provided to the national war effort, from general employee protections during the fighting to favorable government contracts.<sup>19</sup> But, Redfern noted, the government did not appreciate the co-operators efforts: "the society found itself branded

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<sup>17</sup> On the circumstances and consequences of the co-operative turn to politics, see Robertson 2010:155-179; The political scene in England during the period from 1900 to 1919 was an especially tumultuous place. On the rise and fall of the Liberal Party, see Trentmann (2008). For the relations between co-operatives, liberalism, and labor, see Gurney (1996); Adams (1985). The co-operative party went through an elaborate courtship with the labor party that it finally consummated in 1927, when the so-called Cheltenham agreement led to a small number of joint labor-co-operative candidates. Thus, the Co-operative Party began its association with the Labour Party.

<sup>18</sup> "A Peaceful Revolution", Women's Corner, *Co-operative News*, 10/27/1917, p. 1029 [italics added for emphasis]

<sup>19</sup> "The Wholesale in Recent Years", Percy Redfern, *Co-operative Annual 1918*, p. 249; Redfern describes the generous leave policy adopted by the Co-operatives, the War Loans floated through Co-operative banks, and provided their facilities for government purposes.

[by the government] as ‘profiteer’ and blocked in its efforts by the application to co-operative societies of the Excess Profits Tax. Furthermore, when the policy of food control brought the State into a field where the Society was intimately experienced and concerned, the great consumers’ representative ...discovered the door to be practically closed.’<sup>20</sup> Although Redfern acknowledged that matters had improved by the close of 1917, he concluded that “the Society has become convinced of the necessity of an active and powerful public defense and champion of co-operative principles and aims.” Thus, the co-operatives methods were limited by a state that enforced a society of profit and competition. Redfern, like the Women’s guild members, cast the turn to politics as a natural outgrowth of the co-operative mission. The problems with profiteering were systemic and enforced by a state that curtailed the co-operative mission. It was but a small rhetorical move to assimilate the co-operative turn to formal politics to their transformative educational mission. This turn to politics, as recent work on co-operatives has demonstrated, was often incorporated into the broader co-operative project to build communities, which reaches back to the tradition of Robert Owen, in particular, and suffused co-operative ideology in many local societies (Gurney 1996; Hilson 2002; Robertson 2010).

As the co-operators turned to embrace political activism during the war, they did so by incorporating this shift into their longstanding commitment to consumer-centered activism.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the upheavals of the war occasioned serious transformations in co-operative policy, especially their renunciation of political neutrality. At the same time,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 249

<sup>21</sup> As I mentioned above (note 16), the war was not the only possible source of this transformation.

they elaborated on their systematic criticism of capitalist profiteering in terms of their approach to consumption. In essence, the co-operators—both the Women’s Co-operative Guild and the Co-operative Wholesale Society—insisted on their role as a consumers’ group throughout the war, both in terms of their concerns about war profiteering and their commitment to growing the co-operative store. For the National Consumers’ League, as we will see, this commitment to the consumer-oriented strategies weakened—in effect, the Consumers’ League sought to address the issue of the public and the consumer through legislative means and they took advantage of an opportunity to participate in government investigations of changing wartime labor conditions.

#### The War and Women at Work: The National Consumers’ League

For the National Consumers’ League, the war presented a different set of challenges—most notably those associated with industrial growth, changes in the workforce, and disruptions in the investigation of factory labor. In contrast with the Co-operators during the war, the central issues for the consumers’ league revolved around producers rather than consumers. In conjunction with the conflicts over the label, the shifting political opportunities of the war allowed the NCL to reconsider their consumer-oriented campaigns. Although the NCL articulated a vision of ethical consumers, they always stressed the virtues of ethical consumption for workers as well. After all, the NCL constitution declared, “that the interests of the community demand that all workers shall receive fair living wages, and that goods shall be produced under sanitary conditions.”<sup>22</sup> During the war, the U.S. government sought to foster volunteerism and it opened up

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<sup>22</sup> “Article II, Sec. I”, National Consumers’ League Constitution

opportunities to participate in workplace investigations. In this context, the NCL curtailed their consumer-oriented activism and sought to get a handle on the changing labor conditions. Florence Kelley's broad description supplies a useful summary of the shifts that confronted the NCL in the period leading up to and during the war:

[In the years leading up to the war] Real wages were declining. The dollar was already buying less food, fuel and shelter from year to year. But this was recognized as permanent only by a very small group of writers led by Isbel King. Then came the war followed instantly both by a reduction in immigration and by epidemic unemployment which led to no permanent organization – either legislative or voluntary – intended to prevent its appearance on an immense scale at the close of the war. Six months after hostilities opened however, unemployment diminished, and the Allies' contracts and the social results thereof began to grow clearly visible. To fill the void in the labor market created by the cessation of immigration and by the international demand for food, fuel and munitions, there began a flow of recruits to the ranks of industry such as this country had not previously experienced.<sup>23</sup>

The NCL focused their efforts on keeping up with changes in industrial work and they found less time to address consumers directly. For the National Consumers' League, we will see that the Great War and the state's interest in gathering information about working conditions provided an opportunity for the League to shift away from the repertoire of ethical consumption.<sup>24</sup>

Whether at the national, state, or city level, active members of the Consumers' Leagues focused their attention on changes in labor conditions occasioned by the Great War. A member of the Consumers' League of the City of New York noted the following:

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<sup>23</sup> "Changing Conditions in Wartime", Florence Kelley, *The Class Struggle*, Vo. II, No. 2, p. 129

<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, this is not for lack of opportunities to concern themselves with the distribution and purchasing of basic provisions. Women in the United States, especially upper-middle class white women, participated in voluntary thrift campaigns, along with numerous efforts to support the nation in the buildup and official involvement in the War. See Breen (1984),

Because of this terrible European war, we in America are facing great and new responsibilities. If we are to continue to progress, we must do our utmost to maintain high industrial standards. We must stubbornly persist in protesting against the evils of child labor, whether it be carried on in the tenement homes of our city in the pursuit of flower making, or whether it be in the cotton mills of the South where so many little ones under twelve years of age are kept at the looms, or whether it be in the oyster and shrimp canneries of the Gulf States, or in the vegetable canneries of New York, where children of the tender years of five have actually been found working.<sup>25</sup>

Or consider this study of African-American women workers, carried out by the Consumers' League of Eastern Pennsylvania:

With the war came opportunities that brought a new day to this race. These opportunities were mainly due to three causes: (a) the industries were calling for workers, (b) immigration to the United States was rapidly decreasing, and (c) a large percentage of the male population of working age was being withdrawn for war service.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to the centrality of labor issues to the work of the Consumers' League, the members of the Eastern Pennsylvania league demonstrated their optimism that the War, despite its undeniable horrors, might reshape social and political issues in the US and elsewhere.<sup>27</sup> These investigations tended to involve field visits to manufacturers as well as interviews with workers and employers. As usual, these investigations of the conditions of labor from work hours, quality of the materials, lunch breaks, cleanliness, pay, provision for health care, health and illness (air quality, eye-strain, tuberculosis, etc.), lack of standardization in industry (seen as escaping regulation and surveillance),

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<sup>25</sup> "Annual Report of the Consumers' League of New York City, 1914", pp. 17-18

<sup>26</sup> "Colored Women as Industrial Workers in Philadelphia", Report by the Consumers' League of Eastern Pennsylvania

<sup>27</sup> On this issue in Progressive era thought, see Rodgers (1998: 267-317); Kloppenberg (1989). Florence Kelley was not immune to this progressive optimism. In an essay published in 1915, she wrote, "We fortunate dwellers on this continent awakened to find ourselves the heirs of civilization, holding fast the gains of the past, reaching out toward a nobler future, in the face of the world catastrophe." "Twenty-Five Years of the Consumer's League Movement." *The Survey*, Nov. 27, 1915, Reel 100, Slide 336, *National Consumers' League Archives*.

conditions of work (provisions for rest and minimizing strain on workers), worker efficiency and quality of life. The League undertook this investigative work in a range of different industries—public utilities, textile manufacture, and department stores, in particular.<sup>28</sup>

At the same time, before the US entered the War in 1917, the focus on the labeling campaign began to diminish, slowly, although the League continued some of their consumer-centered campaigns. For instance, in the first few years of the war, the League continued their exhibits of tenement-made goods contrasted with ideal industrial conditions. These exhibits reached at least 28 states, from California and Arizona to Massachusetts and Rhode Island, with smaller copies of the exhibit used in schools and clubs.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, conflicts with unions on the issue of the league label were beginning to crop up regularly.<sup>30</sup> By early 1917, the League had amended their contract with employers who used the league label such that the contract would be rendered null and void if the employer refused arbitration.<sup>31</sup> After the war began, the League dealt with a number of issues surrounding the investigation of the factories bearing labeled goods in addition to the ongoing tensions with labor groups. In the “Memorandum on the Label”,

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<sup>28</sup> Florence Kelley, “Wage-Earning women in War Time: The Textile Industry”, *The Journal of the Industrial Hygiene*, Reel 100, Slide 385-396; this essay provides a helpful overview of the league’s work during the war. See also, Kelley, “Changing Labor Conditions During War Time”, *The Class Struggle*, Vol II. No.2, March-April, 1918; “Minutes of the Committee on Wartime Work, May 27, 1918.”, Archives of the National Consumers’ League,

<sup>29</sup> “Report of the Committee on Exhibits”, Mrs. C.E.H. Phillips, *Annual Report 1914-16*, p. 46

<sup>30</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the character of this long-simmering conflict, see chapter 4. Here I would like to emphasize how the Great War was, for the League, offered the political opportunities to focus on ascertaining better information of labor conditions. Thus, the conflicts with unions may have weakened their commitment to labeling schemes, but the conflict with unions preceded the War. Additionally, as with the Co-operatives, the tensions surrounding war production, shifting political opportunities, and diminishing resources, accelerated these tensions. They did not just introduce new and unexpected ones.

<sup>31</sup> “Report of the Label Committee”, Mary Wiggan, *Annual Report, 1914-16*, p. 46

which announced that the League would discontinue the campaign, they revealed that a recent trip by the label committee chair, Mary Wiggin, “lack[ed]...an intelligent report of inspections” and left the labeling committee “with no actual knowledge of the degree of compliance with our standards from the factories visited.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, in addition to conflicts with labor unions, especially the American Federation of Labor, the League faced the problem of uncertain information as to the shifting labor conditions occasioned by the War. With reduced opportunities for travel and shifting composition of the labor force in sectors like railroad towers, industrial garment manufacture, public utilities, elevator operators, and messengers, the League felt that they could no longer verify the label. It is telling that the “Memorandum on the Label” simultaneously proposed a new committee on Wartime Work. Thus, labor inspections, the changing nature of labor, and the opposition from organized labor brought the label to an end.

Once the US entered the war officially in April 1917, labor investigations and legislation only gained significance vis-à-vis the League’s consumer-centered activism, even before they dispensed with the label in 1918. In anticipation of the May 1917 meeting of the Committee on Wartime Work, Florence Kelley circulated a memo to the existing state and local consumers’ leagues, instructing them to gather information about (1) women replacing men in the workplace, (2) new employment of women in the war industries, and (3) the conditions of women’s employment.<sup>33</sup> This first meeting of the Committee on Wartime Work involved representatives from Connecticut, Delaware, Washington, D.C., Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Eastern

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<sup>32</sup> “Memorandum on the Label”, February 14, 1918, Archives of the National Consumers’ League

<sup>33</sup> “To the Presidents of State and Local Leagues”, Florence Kelley, 04/04/1918, National Consumers’ League Archives

Pennsylvania, Western Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island. Each of them reported on the changing labor conditions for women during the past several years, noting new positions that women were occupying. In Eastern Pennsylvania, for instance, Florence Sanville noted that women were being employed at Bethlehem Steel. But in contrast to many other regions, women were not being employed as messengers, elevator operators, and train conductors.<sup>34</sup> The League built on such work as means of advancing legislative campaigns for a women's minimum wage, industrial regulations, and contributing to the war effort, even if some members of the League may not have supported the war as such.<sup>35</sup>

During the war, the League had a direct connection to the work undertaken by the Council of National Defense. In 1915, the League elected Newton Baker to serve as president to replace John Graham Brooks, whose health no longer permitted him to serve. The former mayor of Cleveland, Newton Baker was appointed to Woodrow Wilson's cabinet in 1916 as the Secretary of War. In that capacity, he chaired the Council of National Defense, which formed that same year and was composed of the secretaries of agriculture, commerce, interior, labor, and navy. Baker used this position to encourage reformers, including Florence Kelley and Josephine Goldmark of the National Consumers' League, to contribute to the War effort.<sup>36</sup> The Committee on Women in Industry, established under Baker's aegis as the Secretary of War, provided an opportunity for Kelley and other league members to direct their efforts toward compiling

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<sup>34</sup> "Minutes of the Committee on Wartime Work", National Consumers' League Archives, 05/27/1918

<sup>35</sup> The question of war volunteerism has been central to historical scholarship on the role of women, especially. See Breen (1984); Capozzola (2008); Dumenil (2011); Jensen (2008)

<sup>36</sup> On Newton Baker's role as the Secretary of War, see Craig (2013: 95-236)

and disseminating information about the nature of women's work. Given the wartime boom in American industry and the oversight afforded to Baker in his role as chair, he was able to encourage the League's attempt to gather information about changes on the ground in labor and employment of women during the Great War.

Throughout the war, the NCL sought to re-establish its authoritative knowledge of workplace conditions (for women and children, especially). Their attempts to remedy workplace injustices built on the League's legislative and legal efforts rather than their consumer-centered activism.<sup>37</sup> Even before the US entered the War, Florence Kelley acknowledged the limits of ethical purchasing in achieving goals such as a living wage and equal pay for equal work. In describing the work of the Consumers' League of New York City, which took the lead on advocating a living wage, she wrote, "Among its many useful works, this League has shown that even in stores, where the consumers' power is most direct, obtaining a living wage for working women is, like establishing equal pay for equal work, beyond the power of the shopping public, acting as such."<sup>38</sup> In the years following the war, the League devoted their energies to securing labor laws, investigating working conditions, and securing the right to vote for women. The members of the League Council made these intentions clear in a "10 Years Program", offered at the 1919 Spring Council Meeting. The six resolutions include, (1) the fight for an eight-hour day and the elimination of night work for women; (2) attempt to establish minimum wage commissions in all states; (3) to promote/endorse the child labor bill drafted by the

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<sup>37</sup> This is an empirical claim about the content of the League's activism, not a claim that the League's turn to legislative strategies was unrelated to their ethical purchasing campaigns.

<sup>38</sup> "Twenty-Five Years of the National Consumers' League", Florence Kelley, *The Survey*, 11/27/1915. Reel 100, Slide 336

Children's Bureau; (4) to fight malnutrition by advocating increased production of milk, butter, and other animal fats; (5) to publicize war-induced food shortages; and (6) to continue their study of "dishonest products" and its campaign of enlightenment around them.<sup>39</sup> Of these, perhaps only five and six include activities directed directly at consumers. Even these are broadly written such that continuing inspections and publishing the results to relevant government or policy figures (which the league could do *without* targeting consumers as a body) could satisfy these aims. As historical accounts of the League attest, these words anticipate the League's activism in the 20s and 30s well, in their contribution to the development of the American welfare state.<sup>40</sup> In this way, the League shifted their activities and so, too, their implicit ethical orientation to the consumer.

Yet the turn away from campaigns built on ethical purchasing did not result in a complete renunciation of activists' ethical orientation to consumption. The claims to consumer power remained, along with the universal, ethical responsibilities of consumers. However, they no longer guided activists' strategies to the same extent. When the League did invoke these principles, they gestured toward them as important to the purpose and activism of the League, but ornamentally so. The League retained the principles of ethical purchasing in their constitution. The Annual Report still contained a

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<sup>39</sup> "1919 Council Meeting Minutes", *National Consumers' League Archive*

<sup>40</sup> Skocpol (1992); Kish Sklar (1995); Storrs (2000), all document aspects of the League's move to excise their consumer campaigns. As others have argued, such consumer politics do have inherent limitations with respect to the transformation of the labor process. But these limitations do not mean they are always unadvisable or unproductive.

list of “Don’t for Shoppers” on the back.<sup>41</sup> In fact, the League continued to invoke the interests of consumers, without the expectation that voluntary consumer actions could remedy many industrial issues. Earlier drafts of the constitution, even those published in 1917, contained a clause stating, “...it is...the duty of consumers to find out under what conditions the articles they purchase are produced and distributed, and insist that that these conditions shall be wholesome and consistent with a respectable existence on the part of the workers.”<sup>42</sup> After the 1918 demise of the league label, the League reworded and reaffirmed the principles on which “all the work of the NCL rests”...: “Employers who are under the stress of competition are virtually helpless to maintain a high standard as to hours, wages, and working conditions, unless sustained by the co-operation of consumers.” Thus far, this followed the original language of the League constitution. But the language of the consumer’s duty revealed an important change: “..it is...the duty of consumers to study industrial conditions and to share in the effort to increase production and improve distribution of the necessities of life, and to insist in every practical way upon honesty in industry.”<sup>43</sup> This reformulation of the consumer’s duty stressed the study of industrial conditions and diminished the role of the consumer in ways that expressed the League’s shifting strategic priorities (especially the emphasis on state-building and

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<sup>41</sup> This is not a simple instance of decoupling formal organizational structure from actual work activity, described so well by Meyer and Rowan (1977). After all, within the first five years of their existence, the National Consumers’ League incorporated several clauses into their constitution that reflected their interest in legislative and state-based means to protect workers. Most notably, they claimed: “It [The League] further proposes to promote legislation, whether State or federal, whenever it may appear expedient.” They retained this clause throughout the War. Thus, in 1918, as they abandoned the Consumers’ League Label, the NCL’s formal organizational rules or myths accommodated this shift. The League acknowledged instances (many of them), where consumer purchasing power could not be relied upon to secure safer, fairer, and healthier working conditions.

<sup>42</sup> Annual Report, 1914-1916”, Archives of the National Consumers’ League, p. 5

<sup>43</sup> “1919 Council Meeting Minutes”, Archives of the National Consumers’ League, Reel 4, Slide 470

legislative protection for workers). The consumer now had a duty to “share” in the struggle for improved conditions. The earlier statement had provided a robust assertion of the consumer as a source of social power, not just a duty to act ethically. The new statement accommodated the recognition that consumer power would not necessarily result in a “living wage” or “equal pay for equal work”, to use Florence Kelley’s own words. Thus, the consumer still had a duty to purchase ethically, but the League members no longer suggested that this duty was an expedient or promising source of social change.

For the National Consumers’ League, the War encouraged them to reconsider the scope and direction of their activism. At the same time, this induced a full-fledged reformulation of their ethical orientation to purchasing. While they retained a conviction that consumers had the responsibility to purchase righteous goods, rightly made, they acknowledged the priority of state- and legally-based solutions to the ills of modern industrial production. The shifting political opportunity afforded by the War gave the League the chance to recommit themselves to industrial investigations. Furthermore, the rapidly changing nature of the labor problem necessitated legislative protections for workers. Legislative protections could be relied upon to establish enforceable standards and could also induce greater awareness (and ethical purchasing) on the part of consumers. Rather than treat the consumer as a preferred solution to the problem of poor labor conditions, the Consumers’ League now understood such consumer-based approaches to be limited. They did so without abandoning their understanding that the consumer had specific ethical obligations to purchase justly-made goods.

Co-operatives and the NCL in Wartime

The war hailed a decisive transformation in the projects of the National Consumers' League and the Co-operatives to encourage ethical purchasing. Whereas the National Consumers' League curtailed their consumer campaigns and remained aloof from political partisanship, the Co-operatives remained committed to their consumer campaigns and jumped into politics. Within the context of the war, the NCL and the Co-operatives made use of political strategies in different ways. The former took advantage of political connections and opportunities to gain support for campaigns to gather information about changing labor conditions. They fulfilled a U.S. government priority to encourage voluntary associations throughout the war. Members of Wilson's Cabinet including National Consumers' League president Newton D. Baker were keen to avoid the growth of a state-based bureaucracy on account of the war. Thus, they tended to reach out to local associations to address wartime issues such as access to food.<sup>44</sup> Co-operators felt spurned by British state policies and their treatment of co-operators especially. Despite being incorporated into some wartime reform efforts, co-operators' perceived the British state as insufficiently responsive to the concerns voiced on behalf of poor and working class consumers. They responded by entering into the political realm and forming a co-operative party.

Ultimately, these conflicts rendered crucial differences in each group's organizational mission more salient than they had been in earliest years of the twentieth century. The NCL was a consumers' movement that desired to protect vulnerable workers – especially women and children. Wartime conflicts and political opportunities

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<sup>44</sup> Whereas England eventually engaged in compulsory rationing, the United States attempted to limit food consumption through voluntary food conservation. On these issues, see Breen (1984); Capozzola (2008); Craig (2013); Hilton 2003.

allowed them the chance to protect vulnerable workers without appealing directly to consumers. Moreover, the League could still advocate legislative policies that protected and informed consumers. Consequently, the work of the League still facilitated ethical purchasing, although they severely curtailed their campaigns to promote ethical purchasing as social reform. By contrast, the Co-operation was a consumers' movement that desired to protect vulnerable consumers – the most vulnerable of whom were poor and working class. Wartime conflicts and state policies heightened the threats to poor and working class consumers. These threats accentuated aspects of the Co-operative mission that dealt with those less powerful groups of consumers. As a result, co-operators could draw on their mission to vindicate their continued emphasis on consumers and ethical purchasing through the co-operatives as social reform.

Although the War did not introduce these differences in organizational purpose, it helped create the unsettled context through which these different purposes became important. After all, consumer activists had articulated their visions of the ethical consumer through their similar engagements with developing capitalist institutions. They had pursued similar repertoires of ethical consumer action and assimilated similar motivations. They had done all of this in spite of the very real differences in identity and organizational type. But as the war broke out, British and American states pursued policies to deal with the shifting conditions. In their responses to these distinctive policies and the disruption of their default interpretations, the National Consumers' League, the Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative Guild drew on key differences in their purposes and reformulated their visions of the ethical consumer.

Though these visions differed in accordance with local contexts and identities, in them we can see the imprint of an attempt to derive ethical conclusions about everyday action from within the fabric of capitalist societies.

## Conclusion: Ethical Experiences of Capitalism

After the War, the National Consumers' League, Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative Guild followed less analogous paths. The Consumers' League continued to advocate for vulnerable populations and to secure legislation that would protect consumers, even briefly taking on a labeling campaign in late twenties. The Co-operative Wholesale Society continued to expand into the middle of the twentieth century, encountering new challenges of professionalization and bureaucratization. The Women's Co-operative Guild continued to advocate for women and adopted a strongly pacifist stance until the Second World War. But the vision and strategies that bound them together as consumer activists did not hold. Other groups arose in the name of the consumer, although rarely did these groups take up the problem of the ethical consumer as comprehensively. In the United States, Consumers' Research and later Consumers' Union, provided information about the quality of goods, although less commonly did they relate the quality to the conditions of the workers themselves. In England, the Labor Party took up some issues of consumer protection as well as later and more successful groups such as the Consumers' Association. These groups, too, focused more on the quality of goods or value-for-money rather than a comprehensive ethics of purchasing.

However, throughout the twenty-five years during which that vision held these consumer activists offer a compelling picture of the dynamic stasis and reach of capitalist societies. Despite their contrasting origins, character, and structure, turn-of-the-twentieth-century activists sought ethical solutions to social problems via their everyday experiences as consumers. They witnessed the cruel anonymity of mass-produced

consumer goods, a dimension of what Marx called commodity fetishism. They saw evidence of cutthroat competition in the rush to purchase gifts for Christmas and the tenacious persistence of sweatshops. They were dazzled and alarmed by the spectacle of advertising and the distracted purchasing it encouraged. Seeing these all too real problems, they drew ethical conclusions about the role of the consumer, that everyday figure, in attenuating if not solving them. So they attempted to quell the distraction, to attenuate the pressures of competition, and to see through the cruel anonymity of mass produced goods as publicly-minded consumers. It is true, of course, that these groups did not solve these problems. We may be able to stand aloof from them and judge their efforts futile. We may look back on their naïve desire to foment a popular ethical revolution. But there is another, more critical lesson that we can draw from their experiences. These ethical experiences – of anonymous goods, of intense competition, of the advertising spectacle – are familiar to us, although the ethical spark may be dulled. These are everyday experiences of capitalist societies.

And yet in these everyday experiences and interpretations do not lead, inexorably, to the same outcomes. We can recall the meaningful divergence in activists' paths of action, shaped by their identities and relationships. In their relationships to labor groups, consumer activists' underscored their distinctive class and gender identities. Through encounters with labor, the Co-operatives drew on their working class bona fides to remain steadfastly committed to consumer activism. The National Consumers' League, by contrast, was more circumspect in their dealings with labor, in part because of their upper-middle class character. When faced with the problem of inconsistent ethical

purchasing, they marshaled different organizational resources to remake consumers' desires. By remaining attentive to the situational dynamics of action, we can avoid reducing it to a single imperative or principle.

While their actions were explicable in light of common sociological categories and concepts – capitalism, class, gender, nation, organization, political opportunity – we should take care to clarify *when* these concepts and categories help us explain their actions with precision. To account for these variations in forms of consumer activism more broadly, I have suggested a tentative rule of thumb for making sense of these recurrent problems with labor, business, and consumers. In instances where consumer activists focused on audiences via commodities, they pursued analogous strategies of action. These strategies reflected their ethical engagement with capitalist phenomena more directly. In instances where consumer activists focused primarily on other people—other groups, inconsistent ethical consumers—their distinctive sociological characteristics and contexts inflected their actions. Consequently, these encounters encouraged activists to reformulate or redirect their strategies to address issues raised by those other groups and people. In these encounters, their ethical engagement with capitalist phenomena receded into the background – never irrelevant to their actions, but not shaping them to the same extent. By contrast, the First World War accentuated novel problems – various forms of official and unofficial rationing, major shifts in the workforce, exigent political decisions. These problems called the shared repertoire of ethical purchasing and the settled ethical interpretations of capitalist phenomena into question. Within this context, the repertoires of the co-operatives and the National

Consumers' League diverged decisively. Thus, I have provided the basis upon which to build an explanation of the dynamics of twentieth-century consumer activism.

### Looking Forward

While turn-of-the-twentieth century consumer activists were significant, I do not intend to offer hasty generalizations on the basis of these problem-based studies. That said, my account does open up questions for the study of consumption, social movements, and social action more generally.

#### a) Commodity Fetishism

To begin, I recommend commodity fetishism as a tool for the study of consumer activism and consumption in two distinct ways. First, it provides a basis for investigating the development of consumer activism in comparative perspective. Marx's account of commodity fetishism describes a basic practical issue for consumers in a capitalist society: the commodity renders social relations of labor insensible to consumers. For the purposes of comparison, we can posit that when consumer activists seek to remedy consumers' inability to perceive the conditions of a good's production, their techniques follow from this basic characteristic of the consumer. Scholars have made much of the transition away from labor-oriented (and "political") consumer activism that occurred over the course of the twentieth-century (Cohen 2003; Hilton 2003). Turning away from robust accounts of consumer-citizenship and social duties, activists have turned toward issues such as consumer safety and consumer value. It would be worthwhile to examine how analogous sensory techniques for reconstructing consumers' perceptions persisted in consumer protection campaigns, green consumerism, the Fair Trade movement, and buy

local campaigns throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first century. Furthermore, with the advent of information technologies, the sights and sounds of the labor process have become more directly transmittable; they can even be encoded on product packaging itself. Presently, there are apps for smart phones such as ShopEthical that allow consumers to call up information about the labor process and companies that sponsor such goods.<sup>1</sup> If such movements employ sensory techniques less explicitly, then comparisons will help us to clarify the significance of earlier attempts that relied on analogous techniques. Such investigations will allow us to find whether consumer activists were more likely to engage commodity fetishism directly when it still appeared possible to demystify the labor process. In an era of increasingly elaborate supply chains, the optimistic desire to reconstruct consumers' sense perceptions is likely to have given way to a more complete acceptance of the denigration of the senses. At the same time, attention to how and where such sensory techniques persist would provide a useful means of distinguishing between consumer activists—those that engage commodity fetishism directly and those that do not.

Second, commodity fetishism can play a surprising role in developing an account of consumer activism as a social movement. By drawing on commodity fetishism to develop an account of consumer activists' sensory techniques, I reconnect the content of a common "frame" to the historical development of capitalism. This addresses several ongoing issues with framing in particular and social movement studies in general. Framing has been a central tool for sociologists to incorporate discussions of "culture"

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<sup>1</sup> Anthropologist Daniel Miller signals the sensory potential of information technologies in a proposal for consumer education that uses streaming video to follow the production, circulation, exchange, and use of specific commodities. See Miller (2012: 139-142)

and belief into the study of social movements (Polletta and Chen 2012: 489-491; McAdam Tarrow, and Tilly 2003: 16-18; Snow, Soule, and Kriesi 2004: 380-412). But as a purely formal abstraction, frames have no specific cultural content and communicate nothing about the relationship between frames and their historical context. By contrast, sensory techniques that connect producers and consumers via commodities are bound up with mass production, elaborate supply chains, and consumer experiences in capitalist societies. This connection between sensory techniques and commodity fetishism enables researchers to develop propositions about when sensory techniques matter and how they change in conjunction with socio-historical developments in capitalist societies. Moreover, we can evaluate these propositions in a way that requires us to keep the relation between the “frame” and historical context in mind.<sup>2</sup> Such a move also sets up specific research questions about what social movement theorists call frame alignment. In this chapter, I have merely indicated the relationship between sensory techniques and commodity fetishism. But one could pursue questions about the extent to which consumer activists’ sensory techniques actually align with those of their audiences. Such work would permit us to reconsider notions that alignment between activists’ sensory techniques and those of their audiences are a necessary condition of mobilization.

Third, I suggested that commodity fetishism can contribute to our understanding of what consumption means. I have suggested that projects to encourage ethical purchasing, for instance, gain significance precisely because of the phenomenon of commodity fetishism. In this way, commodity fetishism can be a tool for exploring

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<sup>2</sup> These are precisely some of the questions raised by McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2003: 16, 18).

specific meanings that people attribute to their consumption and the conflicts over those meanings. Although Marx's description suggests that commodity fetishism is unchanging, we may be able to track significant shifts in its meaning over time. If we identify shifts in the style of sensory techniques over time and in different places, we can suppose different understandings of the significance of commodity fetishism. As I suggested above, if consumer activists interpret commodity fetishism as a phenomenon to be overcome by way of sensory techniques, this suggests that they perceive the mystification as partial or incomplete. By contrast, the turn away from such techniques may suggest that such mystifications appear insurmountable. Many attempts to encourage ethical purchasing now incorporate labor standards as one data point among many others to indicate overall corporate social responsibility. These can include environmental impacts, political donations, stances on social issues, animal rights, and many others. Such a profusion of information could very well suggest that there is no reasonable way to ascertain the non-market value of commodities. Under such conditions, consumer activists' methods for dealing with (or not dealing with) commodity fetishism likely indicate historically-developing interpretations of the relations between the labor process, consumers, and commodities.

#### b) Weakness of the Will

Turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists call attention to the weakness of the will as a collective action problem. First, by distinguishing weakness of the will from the free rider problem, we can develop a clear understanding of the consumer activism as a social movement. Typically, consumer activism has been either excluded from the

canon of social movements or begrudgingly incorporated as a case of “new social movements.” (Calhoun 1993; Melucci 1996; Micheletti 2003) As a form of contention that makes claims by means of many small, private acts not explicitly toward the state, consumer activism has run afoul of political process model, which still privileges state-based collective action (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2003). Additionally, these forms of consumer activism lack any clear or obvious protest events – another key means of identifying and analyzing activism (Tilly 1995). By recognizing weakness of the will as a legitimate collective action problem, we can place appreciate consumer activism as a form of collective action characterized by weakness of the will as an obstacle. This kind of problem will be acute in movements that require repeated, private, relatively independent acts – one thinks of internet-based activism and food movements, especially. Finally, we stand to recognize how these issues matter to more conventional social movements. By rereading McAdam’s (1988) classic study of the 1964 Freedom Summer movement, we may be able to develop insights about the predictable role of social networks in overcoming weakness of the will. And this suggests that the problem for activists is not just finding the right incentive, but securing participation when incentives fail to motivate. In Jon Elster’s words, “individuals use one another as extrapsychic devices for self-control.” (1986:265)

Second, weakness of the will provides an opportunity to examine social movements and collective action as disciplinary projects. Foucault famously cast his study of discipline as an inquiry into the soul as an “instrument of political anatomy.” (1977:30) From the historical development of the carceral state (Garland 2006) to the rise

of modern nation-states (Gorski 2003), scholars have explored disciplinary projects as integral to the emergence of the modern world. By attending to the significance of weakness of will in collective action, we can identify key ways that movements engage in disciplinary projects. The comparison between the National Consumers' League and the Co-operatives suggests several two possible axes of variation – whether or not a group or movement makes clear distinctions between members and non-members and the opportunity for surveillance. In the case of the Co-operatives, the clear distinction between members and non-members coupled with the “technology” of the store dividend rendered akratic problems especially significant. The National Consumers' League drew insignificant distinctions between members and non-members and they lacked a simple technology for surveillance of purchasing patterns. They downplayed the significance of akratic obstacles to collective action. This analysis allows us to distinguish tactics vis-à-vis the collective action problems they were designed to surmount.

Did turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activism matter?

But important questions remain. What do the dynamics of consumer activism add up to? Does consumer activism matter and if it does matter, how? It may be tempting to simply write off the dynamics of early consumer activism as inconsequential. One might assume, for instance, that turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists were relatively unimportant because of their limited successes. Sympathetic studies of consumer activism admit that consumer activists have had marginal success, at best, in creating and sustaining ethical purchasing schemes (Glickman 2008; Storrs 2000; Michelletti 2003). The bulk of existing social scientific literature on the “market” for consumer activism

reveals mixed to non-existent results (Devinney, Auger, and Eckhardt 2010; Prasad et. al 2004). Moreover, another question might encourage a skeptical attitude toward turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists: what can we learn by focusing on the strategies of action that these groups pursued? After all, if these strategies were susceptible to such transformations, both great and small, over the course of these thirty years, how can they tell us anything enduring? If we look only at the development of the National Consumers' League, the Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative Guild, perhaps the most optimistic advocates of the ethical consumer, then these questions appear damning. But we can appreciate their significance, and the significance of consumer activism, by returning to this figure of the ethical consumer.

At the turn of the twentieth century, these consumer activists were the primary, public advocates for consumers in England and the United States. By the middle of the century, a range of groups—public and private—advocated on behalf of and to consumers. While their purposes were not necessarily the same as earlier activists, these groups all benefitted from their predecessors struggle to legitimate and institutionalize the consumer as an ethical and political actor. As I mentioned earlier, while other groups may have preceded turn-of-the-twentieth-century activists' strategies and focus on the consumer, these activists announced themselves as consumer activists. The co-operatives were a consumer movement. The NCL was a league of consumers. In so doing, they incurred the ire of those who were suspicious of the consumer as an ethical and political figure, among them trade unions and businessmen. These groups publicized themselves as consumer activists. They hosted meetings as consumer activists. They were the subject

of news articles. They staged public events—all in the name of the consumer. As such, we should think about the significance of these activists not only in terms of their ability to encourage ethical purchasing, but in terms of the ethical consumer as a cultural figure. To phrase this differently, turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists played a central role in institutionalizing the consumer as an actor (Meyer and Jepperson 2000). While subsequent activists may not have taken up their particular concerns, they benefitted from the work that these activists put into making the consumer a legitimate actor able to make ethical and political claims on others.

In this way, the “success” of consumer activism has an ambivalent character. On the one hand, these groups experienced limited successes in the attempt to reform workplaces through ethical purchasing. They did contribute to reshaping work policies, through their public campaigns against sweatshops and through their advocacy of legal restrictions on working conditions. On the other hand, their attempt to legitimate the consumer identity has had an underside that contemporary analysts often suggest inheres in consumer politics itself. Many write as though the figure of the consumer tends to undermine politics and community (Bauman 2008; Cohen 2003; Szasz 2008). In light of this ambivalent character, one could argue that turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists prepared the way for “neoliberal” forms of citizenship. While overused, the word ‘neoliberal’ usually indicates a turn from collective to individual politics. The ‘neoliberal’ citizen understands his or her membership in the nation-state as a consumer of a good or service. By legitimating the consumer as a political figure, the argument goes, consumer activists contributed to this erosion of genuine political life.

While this argument clearly identifies the routinization of the ethical consumer, it overstates the necessary contradiction between consumers and politics. Scholars of consumption are quick to remind us that a range of political possibilities may be grafted onto our role as consumers (Gabriel and Lang 2006; Slater 1997; Miller 2012). Turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists were committed to the possibility that an understanding of consumption could engender robust political engagement. Even for these “consumer” activists, the consumer did not represent the highest form of political involvement. Rather, by understanding one’s role as a consumer, one could be moved to more extensive political involvement. More to the point, if one could appreciate his or her causal and moral relationship to distant workers as a consumer, then one could be drawn into other forms of political engagement as well—especially participation in local political life. Consumer activism was to be a springboard into other kinds of political participation. Thus, turn-of-the-twentieth-century activists saw no necessary contradiction between consumers and politics. It is true that they had difficulty encouraging widespread ethical purchasing, but ethical purchasing was one means to a greater end. While the relationship between politics and consumption may be fraught with difficulty, it is hyperbolic and counter-productive to cast political life and consumption as necessarily in conflict.

Even though they were convinced of consumers’ power, activists offered their own caution against conflating consumption and politics. Members of the Women’s Co-operative Guild expressed the need to act as more than “mere consumers.” Similarly, members of the Co-operative Wholesale Society cautioned against the love of the “divi”,

the dividend paid to those who shopped in co-operative stores. Shopping in the store was to catapult the consumer into involvement in the co-operative society and community. The National Consumers' League, too, committed to extensive legislative and legal campaigns to secure protections for workers. Many of these relied on the direct participation of league members in investigating and publicizing working conditions in many different industries—from baking and white cotton undergarments to messengers and shop assistants. This suggested that, to these activists, the role of the consumer was insufficient. Presented in this manner, turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists differ significantly from many subsequent attempts to politicize consumption. Rather than valorize the act of purchasing as politics, they encouraged purchasing as a path to politics. Purchasing was an opportunity to recognize, more directly, our responsibilities to distant others.

Thus, turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activism paved the way for subsequent attempts to mobilize people as ethical consumers. While they do not provide a simple recipe for resolving dilemmas around neoliberal citizenship, activists suggest the problem is less about the role of the consumer in general. Rather, the problem has to do with the tendency to treat politics as consumption. That is not endemic to consumer activism. It is an outcome of a society where consumption is marketed as politics (Frank 1997; Potter and Heath 2004; Szasz 2007).

We can learn from turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists by attending to the way that they appealed to consumers. They offer a rich ethical language of the consumer that does not simply conflate consumption and politics. Although such an

ethical language will not solve the problem of political engagement (see Putnam 2000; Bellah et. al 1985; Lichterman 2005; Eliasoph 1998), it can encourage us to develop a more accurate description of the problem itself. The problem is not about consumers and consumption as such, but about the consumers and consumption that we encourage. We can learn from consumer activists and develop a more historically-sensitive diagnosis of contemporary political dilemmas: the problems with consumer politics are based in historical developments and practices of consumer societies. But if we give up on the relationship between consumption and politics entirely, then we take the neoliberal description of consumption as given. By attending to turn-of-the-twentieth-century activists and others like them, we stand to provide a more accurate description of the problems that accompany the marriage of politics and consumption.

#### Consumer Politics, Capitalism, and the Ethical Meanings of Consumption

The question of whether consumer activism matters opens up another serious, more personal issue – that of consumption and guilt. Are we responsible to those unseen laborers who make the goods that we buy? All consumers may experience this modern guilt. It is not something willed. It is not a product of special insight or intelligence. It may not even be articulated. But in capitalist societies where we are confronted with anonymous, mass-produced goods, everyone who purchases them is susceptible. Who made these goods? Why do they cost so much or so little? Where do they come from? How did they make it here? Anyone who has entertained these questions will have experienced hints of this guilt. We know very little about the goods we buy. Turn-of-the-twentieth-century activists raised this question acutely. Their predecessors and successors

have raised similar questions. What are we to make of this ethical critique? And what can consumer activists teach us about this distinctively modern form of guilt? These issues of consumer guilt strike at the heart of modern consumption and what it means.

Those who study consumption often resist any attempt to specify its meaning. They resist the claims of activists and moralists who would grant priority to distant laborers or distant consequences in their own attempt to specify what consumption means. Given the cultural tendency to treat consumption as both pejorative and inconsequential, this resistance makes sense. Moreover, it is obvious that people do make use of consumer goods in various, not completely standardized or pre-determined ways. Furthermore, we know that modern consumption entails imaginative engagements with consumer goods (Campbell 1989; Campbell 2005; Graeber 2011). As such, it would be silly to claim that the meaning of consumption can be fixed or delimited for each particular person. But this focus on the meaning of consumption as an individual, imaginative engagement with a good has left us unprepared to confront the enduring issue of consumption and guilt.

While the responsibility to distant others has long been an ethical issue, I raise the question of guilt to examine the meaning of consumption, in particular. In a globalized world, argues Zygmunt Bauman, the distinction between moral guilt and metaphysical guilt becomes untenable (2008:72). By this he means that in a densely interconnected world, it is no longer easy to draw the line between harms for which we are responsible through our own actions and harms that we feel responsible for through no direct fault of

our own. This condition would seem to undermine any attempt to attribute responsibility to consumers for the suffering of distant laborers.

Yet, the ongoing humanitarian projects to support the lives of distant workers articulate this guilty conscience for acts perpetrated as consumers, regardless of the complexities that characterize global commodity chains. Thomas Haskell has argued that capitalism allowed for the emergence of a modern humanitarian sensibility, but not necessarily through the exclusive medium of class-based interests.<sup>3</sup> Haskell emphasizes that a transformation in cognitive style occasioned by the development of capitalism. The expansion of the market, he argues, allowed people to perceive a causal connection between distant actors—including producers and consumers (Haskell 1985:341-342). This shift in cognitive style then engendered a transformation in social conventions of moral responsibility, where ordinary market acts could be implicated in the causal attribution of guilt and responsibility (1985:357-360).<sup>4</sup> Haskell seeks to recover another face of the market “as an agency of social discipline or of education and character modification.” (1985b: 550). Even if it may be difficult to elaborate clear moral rules that indict one act and exonerate another, I would suggest that consumer activists raise the issue of consumption and guilt as a practical one, not merely to establish moral rules. At

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<sup>3</sup> Haskell develops this argument as an alternative to the “social control thesis”: that bourgeois humanitarianism could be reduced to a class-based mechanism for control.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Stamatov (2013) has shown that the modern humanitarian concern for distant others can be traced back to the Spanish empire in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Rather than capitalism, Stamatov points to the “historically specific configuration of institutionally differentiated “value spheres” of European modernity.” Conflicts within religious networks, especially, facilitated the development of long distance advocacy and modern humanitarianism. But I am not interested in the origins of humanitarianism as such. Consequently, Haskell’s argument remains valuable because of its implications for the specific kind of guilt associated with consumption. While the conventions of moral responsibility may have begun to shift well before the nineteenth century, the modern practice and role of the consumer began to crystallize during that period. I am interested in what consumer activists’ accounts of consumer guilt can reveal about the meaning of consumption, which is bound up with the development of capitalism directly.

the same time, by making such claims consumer activists participate in the transformation of moral conventions that help us attribute guilt and responsibility. Their concern with the ethics of purchasing assumes that moral guilt is attached to the meaning of consumption. And the fact that consumer activists have made these claims again and again shows that we must take them seriously as a description of what consumption has meant over the last three centuries.

For such meanings to become more than idiosyncratic individual responses, they require public advocates. Like the fantastical images peddled by advertisers or the many uses to which people put their purchases, the association of consumption and guilt is bound up people's experiences of mass produced commodities. In their anonymity, mass-produced goods invite questions about their origins just as they encourage flights of fancy and are entangled in a range of practical uses. In their astounding commitment to the ethical consumer, turn-of-the-twentieth-century activists played this role explicitly. They raised these questions that lurk in the commodity form in a public way. Where did these goods come from? What responsibilities, if any, does the purchaser have to those many unseen hands involved in producing and distributing the good? Are there ethical differences between goods that are produced and distributed under different conditions? While the conditions for asking such questions lurk in the commodity form, the questions become significant because activists repeatedly pose such questions in public. From abolitionists concerned with the origins of rum and sugar to environmentalists concerned with factory farming, these ethical questions gain salience through their public advocacy of consumer responsibility.

But the advocacy of consumer activists, whether turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists, abolitionists, or contemporary fair trade advocates, does not yet make a compelling argument to accept guilt and responsibility as integral to the meaning of consumption. We must also consider whether this meaning is bound up with the commodity form itself. We have to ask, what about consumption in capitalist societies allows for these recurrent claims about consumer guilt and responsibility. We can recall Marx's observations about the fetish of the commodity. The expansion of the commodity form entails a practical consequence for consumers. The consumer cannot perceive the social relations of production that make the good in question possible. Yet the consumer and producer meet one another indirectly in the act of exchange. This relationship is mediated by the commodity form. There is, after all, an implicit relationship between producers and consumers of goods. The more goods one purchases, the more it becomes possible to raise the question of how this implicit relationship works. Consumer activists would be the first to note that such questions may go unasked and unanswered by the average consumer. Many do not feel that they can afford to entertain, let alone act on, such concerns. Certainly, when it comes to decision-making, the question of consumer guilt does not *decide* what many people will purchase.

The problem of consumer discipline or akrasia reminds us that even the most committed people may not act as ethical consumers. Others may dismiss attempts to promote ethical purchasing as misguided or foolhardy. However, neither is immune to the question of one's complicity in the conditions of distant producers. This question, after all, inheres in the meaningful, sensible character of consumption in capitalist societies.

To be a consumer in a capitalist society is to purchase and use mass-produced goods that remain anonymous, despite the efforts of many to render commodities more familiar. This anonymity is something that we perceive directly. This is commodity fetishism – a condition of practical imperceptibility, among other things. Implicit in the fetish of the commodity is the question of consumer guilt. To what extent am I implicated in these distant, imperceptible social relations of production? After all, the commodity arrived on the market through the efforts of many distant laborers. The question is one that bears no easy answers. It seems obvious to us that no individual consumer could cause most instances of labor exploitation.

But the ethical question follows from the mediated, opaque relationship between the producers and consumers at the point of exchange. When consumer activists engaged in sensory techniques to illuminate the relations of production for consumers, they illuminated the affinity between the commodity form and ethical questions of guilt. When consumer activists insisted on consumer responsibility in spite of significant resistance from business and labor, they insisted that others recognize this affinity. The very possibility that the consumer is guilty, therefore, resides in the form of commodity exchange in capitalist societies. Whether the individual consumer raises the question herself is certainly significant. Many will not trouble themselves, even if the question were raised. After all, purchasing mass produced goods of many kinds is a basic fact for more of us now than at the turn of the twentieth century.

Thus, the work of consumer activists shows us how the ethical experience of consumption is bound up with the conditions of capitalist production, circulation, and

exchange. I have been careful to acknowledge that this ethical experience does not overrule other significant ways of interpreting consumption. Elaborate fantasies and practical uses may be no less essential to consumption in capitalist societies. But my point is this. Each of these “meanings” has its advocates, whether activists or advertisers or individuals (and their friends and family). Each of these “meanings” is grounded in the generalization of the commodity form. While consumer activists may have trouble getting people to act in accordance with their ethical understanding of consumption, they are no less meaningfully engaged with commodities than other, commonly accepted figures. To the extent that we concern ourselves with the significance of consumption, it would behoove us to pay attention to our responsibilities to distant producers. While contemporary interpreters may be right to doubt that clear moral guidelines can or should be agreed upon, these questions are no less significant to the experience of purchasing goods in a consumer society. In short, ethical questions about responsibility are not simply imposed on consumption by moralizing observers, but arise through a careful description of consumption in capitalist societies.

#### Familiar Experiences, Unfamiliar Interpretations

The particular dynamics of early twentieth-century consumer activism may be an ephemeral outgrowth of the world that activists grew up in. This was a world of intensifying commodity and capital flows, proliferating concern with social questions of poverty, and transformations in the ways that people sought to address those social questions. But attention to these ephemeral dynamics, I have argued, can lead us to insights about when categories like gender and class and systems like capitalism shape

the actions people undertake. They can show us how activists' patient work institutionalizes social roles like the consumer. Furthermore, attention to these dynamics can illuminate the historically-evolving meanings of social phenomena such as consumption. Most importantly, although the particular dynamics and ethical character of may be unfamiliar, many of the problems activists' faced are familiar to us now. Consequently, in the obduracy of these everyday problems, we can recognize the genuine appearances of that hulking capitalist apparatus in our own lives. In short, we can bring capitalism from the heavens down to earth. And while the dilemmas may appear intractable, if we can learn to see them as ethical in the manner of those early consumer activists, perhaps we can also be moved to find better ways to address them.

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