Socially Responsible Consumers – A Trojan Horse of Neoliberalism?

Craig Thompson and Ankita Kumar

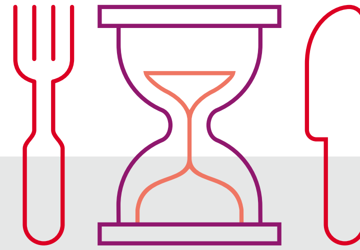
KEYWORDS
Political Consumerism, Ethical Consumption, Slow Food

THE AUTHORS
Craig J. Thompson
Churchill-Bascom Professor of Marketing, Wisconsin School of Business, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI, USA.
craig.thompson@wisc.edu

Ankita Kumar
Assistant Professor of Markets, Innovation and Design, Freeman College of Management, Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA.
a.kumar@bucknell.edu

It's your choice, consumer! In the discourse around fostering sustainability and social justice, consumers are expected to play a key role: "Buy local, buy green, buy fair-trade! – it's in your hands to make the world a better place, to combat climate change." So-called political consumerism is often presented as a viable means against environmental degradation and socio-economic inequality posed by shareholder-capitalism and carbon-intensive consumer lifestyles. Socially responsible consumers can vote with their money to combat social injustice and ecological threats against profit-seeking transnational giants in the corporate world. The idea is that privatized and voluntary solutions to societal problems by individuals in the role of consumers are preferable to legal, political, and regulatory remedies. However, not all agree that political consumerism will be able to solve our planet's problems.

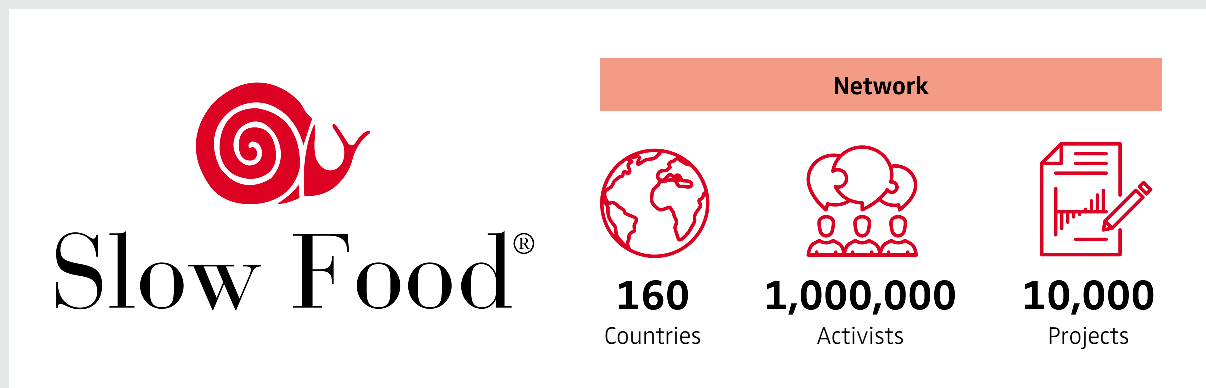
Political consumerism – Neoliberal colonization of the political field? While some theorists see political consumerism as a means to overcome outdated and counterproductive dualities between the public and the private spheres and between citizenship and consumption, others argue that these market-oriented redefinitions of social activism are part of a counterproductive neoliberal colonization of the political field. Rather than delegating the responsibility for more sustainability and fairness to consumers and free market dynamics, politicians should address structural conditions and a fair distribution of wealth beyond consumer responsibilization. Critics further question whether consumers can be sufficiently mobilized by market-based mechanisms to act as risk managers toward socially beneficial ends and to shape the behavior of large corporations.



BOX 1

A study of the Slow-Food Network

Slow Food is a global, grassroots, non-profit, member-supported organization dedicated to preserving and strengthening local food cultures and traditions. It has over 1,000,000 activists across 160 countries. The NGO organizes community-based taste education initiatives, outreach programs, and advocacy campaigns. In 2001, Slow Food petitioned against the EU's ban of the use of raw milk, which is used to make many traditional cheeses. The local chapters enjoy high autonomy with regard to their priorities. They promote eco-gastronomy and support local artisans, farmers, and regional cuisines through communal projects. Slow Food's institutional genesis is commonly traced to Arcigola, an organization supporting regional cuisine, founded in 1977 in Italy by Carlo Petrini and others affiliated with the Italian Communist Party. Though far removed from the radical politics of Italy's leftist vanguard, the receptivity that middle-class American consumers have shown toward Slow Food discourses is also grounded in the cultural legacy of anti-capitalist, back-to-the-land, countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s.



https://www.slowfood.com/

To understand the actions and motives of its participants and of the role the network plays in fostering alternative ways of food production and consumption, we conducted in-depth interviews with 19 participants of the movement, such as past and present chapter leaders, peripheral and low-income participants, and associated food producers. We also used participant observation at events for one year in a metropolitan area in the midwestern United States. The analysis of the qualitative data followed a hermeneutic approach.

Not all agree that political consumerism will be able to solve our planet's problems.

The actually existing neoliberalism in the Slow Food network differs from the dominant and oft-criticized neoliberal order where speed and efficiency reign.

The risks of fighting fire with fire × The following arguments are often brought forward against using market forces against detrimental effects of market forces to tackle current societal challenges.

- **Consumer responsibilization is an excuse for not doing enough on a broader scale** × Critics fear that delegating corrective action to market forces delays broader regulatory action; public regulation and collective organization are shunned for private and voluntary solutions. Purchasing goods with an ethical aura like organic, local, or fair trade, etc., is not regarded as a sufficient response to the environmental crises and socio-economic inequities but rather as a placating ideology.

- **Consumers are not sufficiently imaginative** × Buying ethical goods can give consumers the feeling that they are already doing enough in terms of sustainability. It constrains individuals' imaginative capacities to envision a world beyond the prevailing consumerism. The act of purchasing goods that exude an ethical aura can hence be a surrogate for sustained involvement in social causes. For example, rather than mobilizing for stricter water standards, responsibilized political consumers buy bottled water without questioning this act. As a consequence, political consumerism can dissipate the feelings of urgency and guilt that might motivate consumers to engage in extended collective action needed to redress institutionalized inequities and globally scaled ecological problems posed by the transnational, corporatized system of production and distribution.

- **Ethical consumption is an elitist concept** × Typically, fair-trade, organic, or local products are more expensive than conventional products. Therefore, the concept of consumers being in charge and voting with their money has an elitist touch: Only affluent consumers have the luxury of choice. And the potential traction of a concept based on consumer´s self-responsibility is limited in a world that struggles with increasing poverty and uncertain economic stability. Many consumers can simply not afford ethical consumption.

To gain more insights into the role of grassroots consumer movements in ethical consumption, we conducted an in-depth study of the Slow Food network (Box 1).

In search of meanings and roles of Slow Food × Almost from its inception, Slow Food's ethical authority has been challenged by associations with social elitism, status signaling, and exclusionary taste. These attributions cast doubt on the ethical authority of the Slow Food movement by suggesting it is an ideological justification for pursing self-interested pleasure and signaling social superiority to consumers who favor industrialized fast food. Our participants, however, report and experience alternative narratives and defend and buttress the ethical authority of their Slow Food commitments. In particular, they emphasize therapeutic motives and living out and sharing entrepreneurial passion with others. The activist roots of the organization – opposing corporatized fast food and industrial food production, personified by Carlo Petrini – further infuse Slow Food with countercultural credibility (Figure 1).

- **Therapy against industrialized lifestyles** × Return to nature and tradition have played a key role in the Slow Food movement from its very beginning. Slow Food activists tend to have nostalgic images of bygone rural lifestyles and traditional foodways that are evocative of a simpler, purer, and more intimate age which has now been displaced by the forces of modernization and industrialization. They seek more enriching and rewarding experiences and the pleasures of living in a simpler, slower time and combine these with a political agenda: more sustainability, the conservation of plant and animal varieties, criticisms of monocrop agriculture and highly processed, fast food diets.

FIGURE 1 > How activists safeguard Slow Food's ethical authority through their beliefs and actions

> **Passionate entrepreneurialism** × Passion and dedication is a further reason to justify the ethical authority of Slow Food practitioners. By cultivating and performing a passion for a given endeavor, Slow Food aficionados not only gain an existential justification for their actions but also understand these endeavors as a calling. Their actions are intrinsically rewarding, rather than being imposed by expectations from mainstream society – as in the case of consumers who are following trends or pursuing status. As passionate entrepreneurs, Slow Food aficionados are continuously seeking to expand their culinary capital. Their aim is not to gain economic or social advantages in a competitive sphere of the status system; they aspire to communal relationships based on the goal of sharing passions. Together, they seek to discover new tastes, flavors, varieties, and cultivation techniques and want to acquire skills to preserve culinary traditions. Passionate entrepreneurialism is often enacted through DIY culinary practices which typically involve the recovery of lost skills like cooking, canning, pickling, gardening, and raising animals and butchering. In so doing, they efface the conventional boundary between producers and consumers. The Slow Food enthusiasts venerate these DIY skills as building a more decentralized food system and affording

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greater autonomy from both the corporate-controlled marketplace and the culinary status system that associates fine dining with expensive ingredients and gourmet farm-to-table restaurants.

Political consumerism: Neoliberal fantasy or driver of ethical consumption? From our analysis we conclude that market-mediated – aka neoliberal – approaches need not be condemned in the context of political consumerism. The actually existing neoliberalism in the Slow Food network differs from the dominant and oft-criticized neoliberal order where speed and efficiency reign. In the case of Slow Food, its advocates reinforce the ethical authority of their beliefs and actions through a nostalgic appeal to pre-modern traditions and by interpreting their culinary practices as passionate pursuits that can be shared and democratized. The context of this movement does not produce responsibilized consumers, who see themselves as independent actors managing personal risk through self-interested cost-benefit calculations. Rather, it enjoins consumers to cultivate and share skills and knowledge that afford a collective autonomy from the corporate-controlled, industrialized food system.

Also, our study suggests that this form of political consumerism does not reduce social activism to an individuated process of just choosing the more ethical variant among available offers on conventional marketplaces. Slow Food's political consumerist principles overtly contest neoliberalizing demands for increased efficiency. They reject the idea that the market, via mechanisms of price and demand, should be the ultimate adjudicator of societal value. Slow Food enthusiasts use a nostalgic vision of pre-modern traditions to envision an alternative present. Nostalgia and the yearning for an idyllic and seemingly lost past can be – contrary to the views of critics of consumer responsibilization – an important stimulator of radical imagination. Nostalgic memories can provide an understanding of a better attainable world that challenges prevailing systems and ways of acting on a fundamental level.

In conclusion, while political consumerism won't be the savior of our world, it need not be condemned by critics either. It is one of the many pieces in the puzzle of a sustainable society.

FURTHER READING

Thompson, C. J. and Kumar, A. (2021): "Beyond consumer responsibilization: Slow Food's actually existing neoliberalism," Journal of Consumer Culture, Vol. 21(2), 317–336.
doi: 10.1177/1469540518818632.