

Jo Littler, *Radical Consumption: Shopping for Change in Contemporary Culture*.
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Reviewed by Vince Carducci

New School for Social Research, USA

Recent years have seen an increase in resistance to modern consumerism. Boycotts, buycotts, fair trade, green and ethical consumerism, culture jamming, 'the brand boomerang', voluntary simplicity, 'locavore' programs, and do-it-yourself initiatives are just a few examples, all of which have been studied in *The Journal of Consumer Culture*. Media and cultural studies lecturer Jo Littler proposes a framework for analyzing these actions in *Radical Consumption: Shopping for Change in Contemporary Culture*. A brief text, the book offers a conceptual toolkit for studying consumer disenchantment from a broad perspective. It should interest anyone concerned with contemporary consumer studies and consumer activism in particular.

Littler gathers the diverse strains of consumer activism under the rubric 'radical consumption', noting that 'this is a world in which we are increasingly encouraged to shop for change' (2). The term radical does seem to have an advantage over other more commonly recognized appellations, such as political, conscientious, or ethical consumption, in that it strips away normative connotations to suggest getting at the root of exchange relations more functionally. Rather than just survey the field, Littler weighs the strengths and weaknesses of radical consumption in order to ponder the fundamental question: 'Can we really buy our way to a better, more equitable or more sustainable future?'

Littler begins with a theoretical discussion of moral discourses as applied to current consumer practice. She uses political philosopher Wendy Brown's recent work on morality and ethics to characterize radical consumption as revealing 'a crisis of moralism' in late-modern consumer society, especially with respect to the market system. Extrapolating from Brown, Littler notes that the rise of consumer moralism reveals a breakdown of legitimacy in traditional exchange relations. The apparent need to distinguish radical consumption as ethical signals the perceived lack of that quality in mainstream routines. From the perspective of classical economics, that the latter should be so is a matter of course. But in the contemporary situation in which consumption becomes intertwined with personal identity construction, self-expressive desire often pits dreams of virtuous hedonism against knowledge of the actually existing production and distribution apparatus of global capitalist exploitation, both natural and social. Exploring the ramifications of this comprises the rest of the book. The primary method for doing so is to examine subjectivities of late-modern consumer culture.

The first, and arguably foremost from a global perspective, is the cosmopolitanism of the world consumer-citizen. A product of Enlightenment universalism, cosmopolitanism permeates contemporary consumption by comprehending the world of goods on the level of global consciousness—commodity-chain analysis brought to the point of sale, even if unintentionally. As with Enlightenment universalism, the question is one of equity. Many have pointed out that privilege

inheres in some cosmopolitan positions rather than others, usually originating in asymmetric power relations of core and periphery within the global capitalist system. And yet Littler also rightly cites other literature which sees a more critical cosmopolitanism as offering the potential to balance exchange relations for the better. She presents case studies—American Express RED, Mecca Cola, and Oxfam’s Make Trade Fair campaigns—to illustrate opportunities for and limitations of consumer cosmopolitanism.

Since the end of the nineteenth century, corporations have claimed rights of personhood, and so the second subject position Littler examines is the ethical agency of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Here Littler parses out the positions in a semiotic square. The pro-corporate/anti-CSR pole is that of free-market fundamentalists who see the unbridled pursuit profit as the sole ‘ethic’ of corporate enterprise. The pro-corporate/pro-CSR position is arguably the most prevalent at present, but it seems to reflect a similar crisis of moralism as ethical consumption. For as Littler observes, the CSR idea of ‘giving back’ implies ‘*having taken something away*’ (53, original italics). The anti-corporate/anti-CSR pole is basically conventional ideological critique dedicated to unmasking CSR initiatives as palliatives in lieu of true responsibility. The final perspective, anti-corporate/pro-CSR, puts social responsibility and accountability before corporate autonomy and therefore constitutes the least workable option in practical terms within the prevailing neoliberal regime. Littler sees CSR as a tool of post-Fordist corporate governance, a way for business to absolve itself from corporate welfare schemes of industrialism and advance privatization of yet another sphere of social life. Though she does not declare it, she thus puts herself in the anti-corporate/anti-CSR camp.

The final subjectivities Littler considers are individuals who are known mostly by virtue of their mediated selves. Naomi Klein, Anita Roddick, Reverend Billy, and Kalle Lasn each embody reflexive aspects of radical consumption for others to emulate. Littler looks at their texts to understand how they call audiences to action. Those that are more ‘relationally reflective’ and less individualistic have better prospects for helping to resolve radical consumption’s crisis of moralism.

To frame what a holistic practice might look like, Littler closes *Radical Consumption* with a discussion of green consumption informed by Felix Guattari’s book *The Three Ecologies*. Littler uses Guattari’s construction of interdependent environmental, mental, and social ecologies to expose contradictions in much current green consumption and map out potential avenues of action. One of these is the micropolitics of everyday life of which radical consumption is an important part, if one fraught with contradiction. These activities, however modest, run counter to business and politics usual. They provide scripts by which individuals may act and collectivities may be formed.

Ironically in this regard, *Radical Consumption* sometimes under-theorizes individual action in forming what another political philosopher, Nancy Fraser, terms a ‘weak public’, the collective consciousness of kind that precedes decision-making power at higher levels as it evolves into a ‘strong public’. Useful in this regard is the burgeoning literature on transnational civil society as a counterbalance to expanding corporate and waning state power. Situating Littler’s analysis in that context buttresses what is otherwise an admirable piece of work.

References:

Fraser, N. (1991) 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', in C. Calhoun (ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, pp. 109-142. Cambridge, MA: MIT.

Guatarri, F. (2000 [1989]) *The Three Ecologies*. London: Athlone.