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# Political Consumerism and Fairtrade: Some Critical/Theoretical Points

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**Abstract.** In the past decades, fairtrade and political consumerism became two paradigms of sustainability at large. And above all, in the context of social metamorphosis, they reflected another chapter of postmaterialist values update's. Then, could we talk about a sort of "gastropolitics" (or, better, "gastropolity")? And could we talk about this subject inside the frame of a political sociology of sustainability? Political consumerism refers to the deliberate purchase or avoidance of products, goods, or services for political reasons. And political consumption is a field of research at the intersection of consumer research and political sociology. Political consumption means the consideration of ethical or political motives in the decision to buy certain kind of products and to choose certain typologies of goods. Political consumerism is mainly expressed through boycotts and buycotts by consumers who want to make clear their political, ethical and environmental concerns. With this paper we would like to try to use some of these categories to discuss some examples and models of Fairtrade as a paradigm that has emerged in recent years in public discourse, disputing on what are possible critics and "objections" concerning so-called "Fairtrade debate". And finally, we would like to use, on the other hand, as concrete case studies, two examples that although rather "classic", studied in the relevant literature, serve us to critically explore the edges and involutions of the fairtrade and consumerism paradigm. Two very different brands that nevertheless seem to embody the extremes of this paradigm: on the one hand that of Slow food and on the other that of Whole Food.

**Keywords:** fairtrade, political consumerism, sociology of consumptions, gastropolitics.

## 1. POLITICAL CONSUMERISM AND "GASTROPOLITICS"

Could we explore emerging new hybrid forms of "gastropolitics"[1]? (see Appadurai 1981; Low 2021; Montanari 2021; Marrone 2014) Or, better to say, "gastropolity"? This is one of the suggestions we propose in this article, which seeks to trace some interpretative hypotheses around the interweav-

[1] As is well known, the term "gastro-politics" was coined by Appadurai: see his seminal article, Appadurai (1981). For a discussion, see Low (2021). Let us recall that for Appadurai the semiotic, thus meaning-creating, forms of food take on particularly intense characters within the contexts of "gastro-politics" where food becomes a kind of "medium," a translator of discourses, often of conflicts and within sets of values, of a given community, culture or social context. Sometimes acting as a "homogenizer of actors" mediator, sometimes as an accelerator, creating "heterogeneous" perspectives among them.

ing between political consumerism and lifestyle politics (and also identity politics). We examine these dynamics in the context of the contemporary crisis of the imaginaries of historicized political ideologies. "Food politics" is nothing new, of course; we can refer, for example, to the debate in *Sociologica 1* (2009) about Johnston and Baumann's article *Tension in the Kitchen. Explicit and Implicit Politics in the Gourmet Foodscape*. In this article, the two authors stated that a «sandwich doesn't display its party affiliation, although it may send out important messages about the eater's commitments to sustainability, animal welfare, or local food processors» (Ivi: 1). A snapshot that precisely "captures" the meaning of political consumerism.

Political consumerism refers to the deliberate purchase or avoidance of products, goods, or services for political reasons. Political consumption is a field of research at the intersection of consumer research and political sociology. Political consumption means the consideration of ethical or political motives in the decision to buy certain kinds of products and to choose certain typologies of goods. This transformation, which took place in the mentality, practices, and lifestyles of increasingly wider sectors of public opinion, can be considered as one of the effects of globalization and the structuring of the so-called Network Society, also studied from this point of view by Castells. The WTO's decisions about good markets and transnational political economy, the growth of material well-being and comfort, the expansion of consumption alternatives, the development of the Internet, globalized media, digital communication devices and the allurement of mass self-communication (Castells 2002) create the conditions for the diffusion of such concerns. Political consumerism is mainly expressed through boycotts and buycotts by consumers who want to make clear their political, ethical (Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti 2005) and environmental (Jallinoja, Vinnari and Niva 2019; Bossy 2014) concerns (Becher *et al*. 2022).

Although political consumption carries social and political values, it is above all an individual participation form (Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti 2005), implemented through a series of spending and consumption choices. But, at the same time, actions within political consumerism have collective goals, they can be performed both individually or collectively (Bossy 2014), and increasingly take place according to the logic of individual action. In this manner, political consumerism is also a lifestyle choice, and it is fully within the horizon of post-materialist values that scholars such as Inglehart have highlighted as characteristic of the postmodern condition. It is precisely the post-materialist dimension, in a key of cleavage and dichotomies, that can be used to understand some of the highly successful phenomena that distinguish food culture and food politics. These aspects are at the center of the interests of "foodies" (i.e. people with a serious interest in eating and learning about food, but who are not professionals in that field).

From another point of view, however, consumerism is also a form of collective action. It also involves actions favoring public interests, subject to commentary, sharing, and social influence through social networks. Furthermore, political consumerism is a form of identity politics. By using the market as a venue to express political and moral concerns, political consumerism is a manifestation of what Bennett (1998) has termed "lifestyle politics." It reflects the broader tendency to see political meaning in recreational experiences, entertainment choices, fashion decisions, and other personal happenings. As Sapiro (2000: 4) explained, political consumerism can be readily adopted because it involves the «use of repertoires or familiar languages of action and interaction» (see also Frank 1994; Traugott 1995). As "politics by other means", it reflects a movement away from institutional and formal modes of engagement. Instead, it is grounded in the belief that day-to-day action might be a more effective way to achieve political ends by using the market to influence public policy (Sapiro 2000). Past research indicates that women, young people, and more educated individuals are particularly likely to make consumption decisions based on political and ethical considerations. Political consumerism has been linked to factors known to explain political participation such as religiosity, partisanship, and government trust, but it is also associated with post-materialism and a sense of moral obligation, namely orientations more closely tied with lifestyle politics (Bennett 1998; Inglehart 1997; Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti 2005).

### *1.1. Political consumerism and Fair trade*

At the same time, as it is very well-known and as stated by other authors, theories of lifestyle politics are premised on discussions of modernization (Giddens 1991), individualization (Beck 2007), and value change (Inglehart 1997). According to these theories, broad societal changes, including globalization, have resulted in the breakdown of traditional institutions and led to a newfound emphasis on "self-reflexivity and political expression". As de Moor (2017: 180) writes, «Lifestyle politics depart from a realization that one's everyday decisions have global implications, and that global considerations should therefore affect lifestyle choices». Lifestyle politics also differs from élite-directed acts because

mobilization tends to be spontaneous, targets multiple actors, and relies heavily on digital media use (Bennett 2012; Stolle and Micheletti 2013).

But why "gastropolitics", therefore? According to Marrone (2023), gastronomy has always been a political space, both physical and proxemic. Consider the invention and spread of restaurants, and more famously, cafés before, during, and after the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Today, gastronomy takes on the role of a "generalized mediating" discourse and media, in a Luhmannian sense. And, even more, following Latour, as well as other sociologists and anthropologists, gastronomy and gastropolitics become a space for inventing new relationships between natural and cultural dimensions.

In political consumerism, as we know, we can find many movements and orientations that consumers may join, such as veganism, organic and agroecological products, and slow fashion, among others. In the Italian context, the most well-known is *Slow Food*.

Political consumerism refers to the practices of using one's purchasing power to support or boycott products and companies based on their political or social values and positions. This includes buying products from companies that support causes such as environmental sustainability, and social justice, as well as avoiding products from companies that engage in practices considered harmful or unethical. The practice of political consumerism has become more prominent in recent years as consumers are increasingly aware of the impact of their purchases on broader social and political issues. However, some critics argue that political consumerism may not be an effective means of achieving radical social or political change, as it can be difficult to accurately assess companies' policy positions and the impact of individual purchasing decisions. More importantly, it sometimes appears to involve sectors of society that have the (economic) "availability" that enables them to adopt such practices.

## 2. POLITICAL CONSUMERISM, FAIR TRADE: TWO VERY WELL-KNOWN EXAMPLES, SLOW FOOD VS (&) WHOLE FOODS?

### *2.1. Slow Food*

While we acknowledge that Slow Food has been extensively studied, we aim to undertake a critical analysis of specific elements within this movement (Andrews 2010). Slow Food, recognized commercially as a brand, encompasses activities that align with the paradigm of Fair trade. This paradigm, along with sustainability, forms a core component of Slow Food's programmatic principles. Notably, Slow Food identifies itself as an "international non-profit association", a designation that reflects its broader social and ethical commitments. However, as Micheletti and Stolle (2008) point out, this definition also incorporates elements of what can be described as fashionable social justice that spurs consumerism. By examining these dynamics, we hope to illuminate the complexities and contradictions inherent in Slow Food approach to promoting ethical consumption and sustainability.

Our analysis aims to explore how Slow Food's initiatives and branding strategies both support and potentially undermine its stated goals of social justice and sustainability. We critically assess some ways in which the movement's commercial aspects interact with its ethical commitments, providing a nuanced understanding of its impact and significance in the contemporary food landscape.

As it is well known, the association was born in the Langhe, in that triangle of agricultural resources and a tradition of "high quality" food which lies between Bra, Alba, and Barolo, and which today represents a very rich food and wine tourism area. We are speaking of the same Langhe where, in 1986, 19 people died for drinking wine with methanol, a traumatic event from which a sort of widespread questioning arose within the public discourse around the theme of food sophistication and the implications for human health and that of the ecosystems of the race for profit that orients not only the food industry but also smaller-scale and "neighborhood" productions. A closely related issue is the quality of what one eats.

Slow Food's roots can be found in the post-1968 extra-parliamentary left and, in some ways, also in the post-1977 one. Slow Food was born in Piedmont as a local version of the national acronym of *Arcigola*, and in a political area – due to the background of its founders – contiguous to the leftist groups and newspapers *Il Manifesto* and *Lotta Continua*. In its ability to collect and re-elaborate some requests coming from the previous season of political mobilization, it contributed to realizing a typical trajectory of the so-called Italian "riflusso". It contributed to the reactivation of eccentric issues compared to the strongly ideologized phase of the Sixties and Seventies. A reactivation that also passes through the contamination – in this case, "reversed" in sign and "subverted" in sense and meaning – with the consumerism and the hedonism of the 1980s, of *Reaganomics* and, in Italy, "Craxism" (and "Pentapartito"). But this kind of movement has also signified another form of "resistance" to mainstream consumerist capitalism, through food and new forms and styles of life.

An analysis of speeches, statements, and articles by Carlo Petrini (2005), the founder, and leader of

Slow Food, particularly those published in the Espresso Group newspapers (*La Repubblica* and *L'Espresso*) and *La Stampa*, provides valuable insights for critically examining this success story and its broader political and cultural implications. Petrini's discourse reveals several specific and critical points regarding the Slow Food movement. Firstly, we encounter various oxymorons, dichotomies, and cleavages within the narrative. These are characteristic of "postmodern" paradoxes that juxtapose seemingly contradictory elements: for instance, the movement unites metropolitan intellectuals and affluent Western gourmets with farmers from developing countries. This juxtaposition highlights the complexities and inherent tensions within Slow Food's mission and constituency. Furthermore, Petrini's rhetoric often navigates the delicate balance between promoting traditional, local food practices and engaging with the global food market. This duality raises questions about the movement's ability to maintain its ethical commitments while operating within a commercialized and often exploitative global food system.

By critically analyzing these paradoxes and contradictions, we can better understand the intricate dynamics that define Slow Food. This analysis not only sheds light on the movement's successes and challenges but also offers a deeper perspective on its role in shaping contemporary food politics and culture. Glocalization vs. Anglo-Saxon neoliberal globalization – the first term is accompanied by notions such as "km 0" (to guarantee the non-adulteration of the product by shortening the distribution chain between producer and consumer as much as possible) and food sovereignty (a concept subjected to transversal political appropriations). We find here the echoes of the critique of post-68 bourgeois science (epistemological anarchism). Paradoxically, official science is sometimes viewed with suspicion by Slow Food, because: 1. it is "reductionist" and "quantitative", and not "holist", 2. because it denies that some senses may support the interpretation of reality, as allied to "productivism", and 3. because it refuses to grant "equal dignity" to traditions and "traditional knowledge" (Simonetti 2012). Indeed, the association pursues the foundation of a "new gastronomic science".

Further specific and critical points concerning Slow Food culture are addressed in *Beyond Consumer Responsibilization: Slow Food's Actually Existing Neoliberalism*, by Thompson and Kumar (2018). The analysis reveals that several aspects of the association, often interpreted as signs of consumer responsibilization, are more accurately attributable to the organization's historical development. In particular, and somehow paradoxically, Slow Food's legacy of localized strategies of resistance (see, e.g., Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Negri 2005). According to Thompson and Kumar, this historical orientation has led to a philosophical and political preference for forms of collective resistance to the dominant order that are characterized by being geographically dispersed, localized, autonomous, small-scale, and heterogeneous in their orientations and tactics (Hardt and Negri 2001). Rather than merely encouraging individual consumers to make ethical choices, Slow Food promotes a decentralized approach to challenging the prevailing food system.

The movement's emphasis on localism and autonomy reflects a broader critique of neoliberal globalization, advocating for diverse and context-specific solutions over standardized, top-down approaches. This preference for localized resistance aligns with theories of rhizomatic organization (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), where power and influence, as well as forms of resistance, spread horizontally rather than hierarchically, allowing for greater flexibility and adaptability in the face of global challenges. By examining these critical points, we gain a deeper understanding of how Slow Food navigates the complexities of advocating for sustainable and ethical food practices within a neoliberal framework. This analysis also highlights the potential for Slow Food's strategies to contribute to broader social and political transformations, fostering a more equitable and resilient food system.

But, at the same time, «the commercial marketplace has become a primary social field for engaging in ethical identity work (as well as many other types of identity projects)» (Thompson and Kumar 2018: 16). However, this structural condition does not mean that such endeavors are a direct reproduction of neoliberal mandates. «In the case of Slow Food, its advocates reinforce the ethical authority of this cultural system through a nostalgic appeal to pre-modern traditions and by interpreting their culinary practices as passionate pursuits that can be shared and democratized» (*Ibidem*; see also Bertilsson 2015).

### *2.2. Political consumerism in political science: neoliberalism, forms of aesthetic resistance or leftist populism? Some critical reviews*

On the one hand, Sassatelli and Davolio (2010: 227) write:

> *Slow Food concerns a family of issues which refer to a politico-aesthetic problematization of food, dealing with taste, its education and its pleasures. […] (SF initiatives) responded to an articulated political agenda, including the education of the public, the consolidation of a sense of*

*national identity (and superiority) and even the marketing of one's own national heritage. As an international but locally grounded network of associations SF clearly stands at some distance from such nationalistic concerns. Yet, it seems to represent the contemporary, humanistic, global and environmental version of a politico-aesthetic problematization of food consumption that is predicated on aesthetic experiences and food training.*

On the other hand, Simonetti (2012: 171) disputes: «the truth is that consumer needs are not standardized and uniform»; and, on the contrary, consumerism is driven not by a desire for uniformity, but for distinction. It is for this reason that anti-consumerist positions are so easily exploitable or recoverable from the system: because non-standard consumption confers distinction. «No such thing as "subversive" consumption exists» (*Ibidem*).

On the contrary, anti-consumerist and countercultural positions, according to other authors, «distracting the attention and passion of people from democratic institutions and from the drafting of truly effective reform policies, have facilitated the birth of a vociferous but practically ineffective radicalism» (Heath and Potter 2005, cited in Simonetti 2012: 171).

Again, according to Simonetti (*Ibidem*): «even a quick look at the kinds of individual behaviour praised by SF confirms this conclusion. Having personal relations with producers and suppliers, as well as spending time at the table in good company, are costly and time-consuming activities: in other words, they are luxury goods».

In this sense, SF embodies a modern, humanistic, global, and environmental take on the "politico-aesthetic critique of food consumption", rooted in aesthetic experiences and culinary education. Eco-gastronomy, which combines environmental awareness with the enjoyment of food preparation and consumption, is SF's hallmark. This concept is encapsulated by the motto, "eat less, eat better" (Sassatelli and Davolio 2010).


**Figure 1.** Slow Food and ecology. Source: https://www.slowfood.com/.

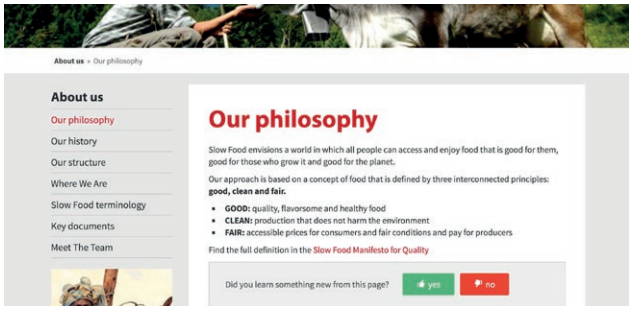


**Figure 2.** Slow Food and ecology. *Source*: https://www.slowfood.com/.

Regarding leftist values, Slow Food leader Petrini has maintained a pedagogical and critical function, blending it with a form of "leftist hedonism" that emphasizes both pleasure, aesthetics, and education. This vision starkly contrasts with the neoliberal paradigm of the *homo oeconomicus*, who is capable of making the best rational choices independently: a hyper-Enlightenment, individualistic concept. Neoliberalism assumes "voting (and eating) with your money", but, in contrast, Slow Food introduces a hybrid paradigm of the consumer-citizen. In this framework, polarizing dichotomies often dissolve, and the friend-foe dynamic intersects with the theme of sustainability.

While acknowledging the limitations of typification, we also reference the figure of *homo ecologicus*, which highlights the connections and consequences of human behavior concerning the environment. This concept intersects with consumerism and Slow Food themes (see Figures 1 and 2), such as the promotion of local (kilometer 0) food and the fight against food waste. The term homo ecologicus or ecological citizen is explored for instance by Christoff (1996) in *Ecological Citizens and Ecologically Guided Democracy*. In this seminal piece, Christoff deepens the concept of the ecological citizen, a figure that embodies the integration of environmental consciousness with civic responsibility. Christoff argues that the ecological citizen transcends the traditional notion of citizenship, which is primarily concerned with political and social rights and duties within a given nation-state. Instead, the ecological citizen recognizes their responsibility toward the global environment, emphasizing the interconnectedness of local actions and global ecological impacts. This perspective shifts the focus from individualistic and short-term gains to collective and long-term environmental stewardship (see also van Lenteren 1997; Hay 2002). The concept of sustainability requires a more complex figure of the consumer, reflecting a variety of values and inter-

ests and encompassing behaviors that actively contribute to greater social justice and a new circular and sustainable economy.

## 3. POLITICAL CONSUMERISM AND FAIR TRADE. A QUICK LOOK TO WHOLE FOODS MARKET: FROM FAIR TRADE TO AMAZON… AND SOME TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS

Agriculture has long been a focal point of environmental activism due to its significant role in environmental degradation and greenhouse gas emissions. Additionally, there is growing concern over rural decline and the disappearance of family farms. The fair-trade movement underscores the anti-corporate messages prevalent in global justice activism, highlighting that many of the worst abuses in the global system are linked to food production and distribution. Whole Foods Market (WFM), starting from its origins and founding in the late 1970s, as a small family-owned organic food retailer in Texas, has grown into a supermarket chain (similar in some ways to the industrial and commercial offshoot of the Slow Food movement, as the *Eataly* brand has been), to becoming a multinational corporation, recently turned into an Amazon property, and finally positioning itself as a kind of "ethical actor" in this context. Its shopping spaces offer a tangible example of the citizen-consumer concept in action (online and offline spaces, see Figures 3). WFM stores are designed to project an image of a feel-good business that is deeply engaged with the local community, committed to environmental protection, supportive of local farmers, and dedicated to employee well-being. Above all, WFM caters to customers' desire for delicious food they can feel good about consuming (with organic foods from all parts of the world).

WFM stores feature numerous displays promoting healthy living, organic agriculture, and the importance of local farmers, all of which are central to the company's corporate activities. CEO and founder John Mackey describes WFM as pioneering a "new business paradigm," which integrates ethical considerations into its business model. This approach not only aims to satisfy consumer demand for high-quality, sustainably sourced food but also strives to set a standard for corporate responsibility in the food industry. By framing itself as an ethical corporation, WFM illustrates how businesses can align profit motives with broader social and environmental goals. This model reflects a shift towards more conscious consumerism, where purchasing decisions are influenced by values such as sustainability, fairness, and community engagement. Although there are, admittedly, several differences from Slow Food, the mechanisms of evolution, values, stories, and discursive forms can be compared. As such, WFM serves as a case study in the evolving relationship between business practices and environmental activism, highlighting the potential for market-driven solutions to address some of the most pressing issues in the global food system:

> *Rather than meeting the requirements of consumerism and citizenship equally, the case of WFM suggests that the citizen-consumer hybrid provides superficial attention to citi-*

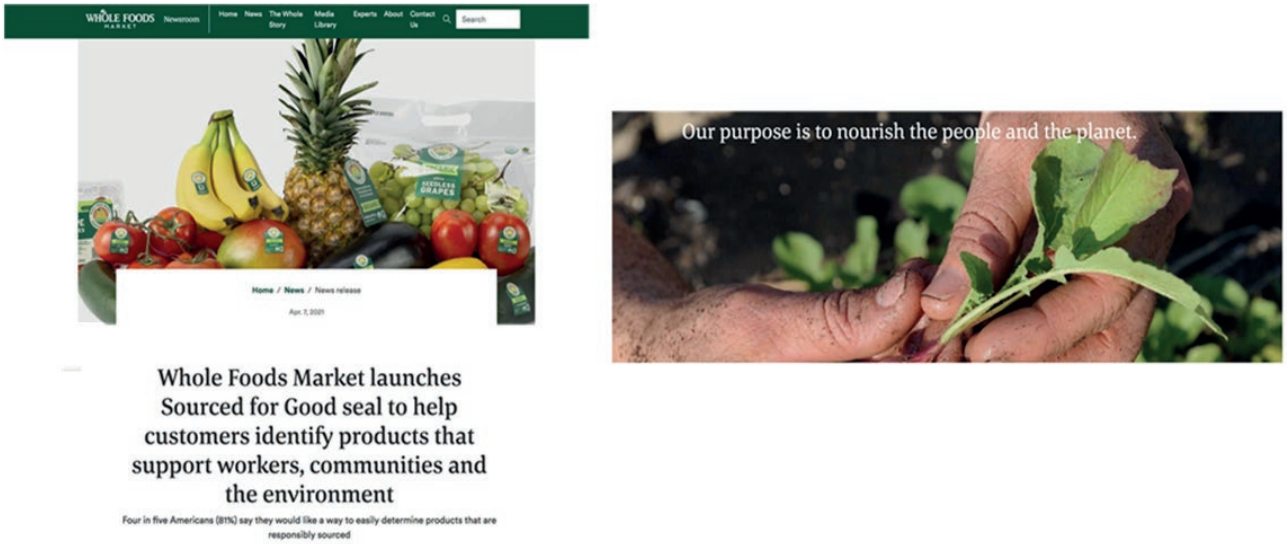


**Figure 3.** WFM and ethical consumption. *Source*: https://media.wholefoodsmarket.com/

> *zenship goals in order to serve three consumerist interests better: consumer choice, status distinction, and ecological cornucopianism. I argue that a true "citizen-consumer" hybrid is not only difficult to achieve, but may be internally inconsistent in a growth-oriented corporate setting* (Johnston 2008: 229).

But in recent years, in addition to being bought by Amazon, Whole Foods has faced several accusations: of anti-union behaviour, of not respecting organic food standards, and, finally, of becoming a "big box" with online sales and supermarkets for hipsters. That sounds familiar and it is partially similar to some Slow Food characteristics. The unifying logic that integrates various strands of ethical consumer discourse posits that the choice of commodities can fulfill an individual's desire for personal health and happiness while simultaneously fostering sustainability and social harmony for society at large. This perspective makes the concept of the hybrid citizen-consumer plausible—someone who can satisfy personal desires while also addressing social and ecological injustices.

The hybrid notion of a "citizen-consumer" is prevalent in both activist and academic literature. It suggests a social practice capable of reconciling the competing ideologies of consumerism – an ideal rooted in individual self-interest – and citizenship, which is grounded in collective responsibility toward social and ecological well-being (Johnston 2008). This dual role embodies a sophisticated understanding of consumption that goes beyond mere personal gratification to include broader ethical considerations. In this framework, consumer choices are not just transactions but acts of citizenship that contribute to the common good. Ethical consumption becomes a form of activism, where everyday purchasing decisions are imbued with political significance. This approach challenges the traditional dichotomy between self-interest and collective responsibility, suggesting that they can coexist and even reinforce one another. Furthermore, the "citizen-consumer" concept underscores the potential for market-driven solutions to address systemic social and environmental issues. By making informed and ethical purchasing decisions, individuals can drive demand for sustainable products and practices, thereby influencing corporate behavior and market trends. This dynamic creates a feedback loop where ethical consumption not only reflects but also shapes societal values and norms. That logic makes plausible the concept of the hybrid citizen consumer, able to satiate personal desires while simultaneously addressing social and ecological injustices.

The hybrid concept of a "citizen-consumer" is found in both activist and academic writing, and implies a «social practice that can satisfy competing ideologies of consumerism (an ideal rooted in individual self-interest) and citizenship (an ideal rooted in collective responsibility to a social and ecological commons)» (Ivi: 232). Overall, the citizen-consumer embodies a holistic approach to consumption that integrates personal well-being with social and ecological sustainability. This paradigm shift seems to encourage a more conscientious and participatory form of consumerism, where individuals recognize their role and impact within a larger socio-economic and environmental context. But, most significantly, the WFM retail experience suggests that «the citizen-consumer goals of pleasurable and ethical shopping are accessible and never in contradiction». WFM offers delicious and highly varied food choices while employing the «feelgood and do-good message on everything from food packaging to in-store signage to paper napkins» (Ivi: 249).

In conclusion, there are two further important issues to consider that should be further explored but which we need only mention here for now: first, the importance of semiotics and rhetoric of certification. In this sense, Marston (2013) discusses how certification processes can act as both a loophole and a trap for producers, including artisans and farmers. Certification, intended to ensure fairness and quality, often becomes a double-edged sword, creating challenges and barriers that can undermine the very goals it aims to achieve. Second, the persistence of ideological divides. Gohary et al. (2023) explore the ideological influences on fair-trade consumption. Their empirical study confirms that conservatives are less likely to choose fair-trade products compared to liberals. This disparity is attributed to conservatives' higher social dominance orientation, which conflicts with the principles of establishing an equitable society through fair-trade practices. The study highlights that conservative ideologies prioritize maintaining existing social structures, which contradicts the egalitarian goals of fair trade. More generally, beyond the seemingly obvious link between conservative ideology and anti-environmentalist and, at the same time, anti-consumerist positions, what is interesting is perhaps the presence of discourse, often under the radar, but that often tries to impose itself, even in public and political debate (e.g., during elections). A discourse that seemingly tries to steer and manipulate this public debate toward new forms of populism that, in criticizing elites, often criticizes the adoption of environmental measures, the concerns about a more equitable society, and even a more attentive approach to food quality.

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