

The citizen-consumer hybrid: ideological tensions and the case of Whole Foods Market

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Abstract Ethical consumer discourse is organized around the idea that shopping, and particularly food shopping, is a way to create progressive social change. A key component of this discourse is the “citizen-consumer” hybrid, found in both activist and academic writing on ethical consumption. The hybrid concept implies a social practice – “voting with your dollar” – that can satisfy competing ideologies of consumerism (an idea rooted in individual self-interest) and citizenship (an ideal rooted in collective responsibility to a social and ecological commons). While a hopeful sign, this hybrid concept needs to be theoretically unpacked, and empirically explored. This article has two purposes. First, it is a theory-building project that unpacks the citizen-consumer concept, and investigates underlying ideological tensions and contradictions. The second purpose of the paper is to relate theory to an empirical case-study of the citizen-consumer in practice. Using the case-study of Whole Foods Market (WFM), a corporation frequently touted as an ethical market actor, I ask: (1) how does WFM frame the citizen-consumer hybrid, and (2) what ideological tensions between consumer and citizen ideals are present in the framing? Are both ideals coexisting and balanced in the citizen-consumer hybrid, or is this construct used to disguise underlying ideological inconsistencies? Rather than meeting the requirements of consumerism and citizenship equally, the case of WFM suggests that the citizen-consumer hybrid provides superficial attention to citizenship 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.

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Whole Foods Market (WFM)¹– the world’s largest ‘natural’ foods empire – is encouraging me to change the world by changing what I eat. Walking into a WFM store, I see a reassuring slogan, “Whole Foods, Whole People, Whole Planet,” advertised along with its “core values” on everything from paper napkins to the store walls. A large wall sign of a juicy, dripping steak is underscored with the text, “feel good about where you shop” – a promise and challenge reiterated on the brown-paper shopping bags and re-usable cloth bags. Another large sign floating from the ceiling depicts fish, and gives me the same “feel good” message along with the added information: “Seafood flown in from our very own wharf.” I go to pay for my groceries, which seem consistently to spill over from my prescribed list, and include items ranging from organic dupuis lentils to hand-made coconut dusted marshmallows. At the cashier, I notice pictures of local farmers depicted on the check-out screen, along with the assurance that I am supporting them with my shopping choices. As I walk past the check-out, I peruse a collection of pamphlets under the sign “Take-action!” and pick up some information on genetically engineered foods, and a “natural primer for the carb conscious.” I feel excited about the delicious food I have purchased, but confused about my role. Am I acting as a consumer looking out for my own interest in artisanal cheese and slow-rise bread, or am I a citizen supporting local agriculture and the “whole planet” through my shopping? Does Whole Foods offer a new opportunity for shoppers to become “citizen-consumers” who can have it all – pursue their interest in delicious food, while feeling good about their responsibilities to other people, other species, and the environment?

Despite a broad consensus that consumers are key actors in global political systems (Beck 2000; Miller 1995), substantial debate remains about the extent to which these kinds of market opportunities represent new opportunities for consumers to exercise citizenship (Micheletti et al. 2004; Zukin and Smith 2004; Soper 2004; Slater 1997; Gabriel and Lang 2006; Scammell 2000).² As shopping activities are more prominently linked to social and environmental causes, academic and activist accounts of consumer “activism” explicitly and implicitly collapse the distinction between “consumers” and “citizens,” suggesting that “voting with your dollar” is a

¹ While WFM’s aspirations are oriented towards customer concerns of health and environmental sustainability, its growth strategies are unabashedly entrepreneurial, garnering massive growth, profits, and an impressive record of expansion and acquisitions. In 2006, WFM boasted revenues of \$5,607 million – a 19% increase from 2005. Earnings per share in 2006 were \$1.41, which was a 40% increase from the previous year. In 2007, the company reported that it employed 39,000 people, and had 195 stores in the USA, Canada, and the UK. Even though Whole Foods Market faces competition, particularly from the large-scale entry of WalMart into the organic sector, industry analysts consider Whole Foods Market the industry giant of natural foods (especially after the February 2007 \$565 Million dollar buyout of its major competitor, Wild Oats) as well as a solid economic performer (e.g., WFM was named the best 2007 retail stock by The Motley Fool stock advisors; Lomax 2007).

² Approaches emphasizing the manipulation of consumers are most often associated with the Frankfurt School and post-war critiques of the advertising industry (e.g., Marcuse 1964; Packard 1981, but today, such approaches are often viewed as overly pessimistic and old-fashioned because they underestimate consumer agency, and over-state the importance of selling (or manipulating) consumers (Micheletti 2003:70; Schudson 1991, 1984). Against Frankfurt pessimism, more optimistic accounts focus on consumers’ abilities to manipulate the commercial environment to construct meaningful lifestyles and identities (e.g., Fiske 1989; Abercrombie 1994; Nava 1991). Further, a voluminous business literature on the topic emphasizes how consumer demand fuels the growth of socially responsible corporations promoting social justice and environmental sustainability (Cairncross 1992; David 1991; Heald 1988).

highly significant, if not a preferred venue for political participation (Dickinson and Hollander 1991; Shaw et al. 2006; Stolle et al. 2005; Arnould 2007; Barnett et al. 2005; Schudson 2007; Stolle and Hooghe 2004; Hilton 2003:1). Even cautious accounts (Soper 2004; “Gabriel and Lang 2005) suggest possibilities for a new era of hybrid citizen-consumers where shopping can serve as an entry point to larger political projects associated with citizenship.

An investigation of the citizen-consumer is a timely subject of inquiry. The hybrid concept has gained considerable currency among consumers, and is increasingly prominent within academic work that addresses the hybrid concept’s sociological, economic, political, and philosophical implications (e.g., Jubas 2007; Slocum 2004; Soper 2004, 2007). Although the academic literature depicts the citizen-consumer in relatively buoyant terms, there is a paucity of empirical work that examines its manifestation in “real-life” market settings and explores the ideological contradictions that play out on the ground level of ethical shopping. At the same time, there is also a need for social theoretic work on this topic (Gabriel and Lang 2005:39–40), that explores the contradictions that play out on the ground level of ethical shopping. As such, this article has two purposes: to explore theoretically and to study empirically a specific market context that frames ethical consumption and the hybrid citizen-consumer. First, this is a theory-building project that unpacks the citizen-consumer concept, asking how the citizen-consumer hybrid is assembled, what ideological tensions and contradictions does it appear to engender, and how it fits within a larger discourse of ethical consumption. The second purpose of the article is to relate theory to an empirical case-study of the citizen-consumer using a case-study of Whole Foods Market (WFM), a corporation frequently touted as an ethical market actor.

To be clear, my goal is not to evaluate WFM and its transformative possibilities in their entirety, but to examine specifically the manifestation of the citizen-consumer concept in its shopping spaces, thus revealing some of its contradictions. Although it is important to understand how consumers engage with (and avoid) ethics while shopping, this article brackets the question of individual consumer motivations, which are often conflicted, complex, and multifaceted (Sassatelli 2006: 224; Schudson 1991). The WFM case cannot be generalized to all other corporate retail environments,³ but it remains an important case given its market prominence, and the prominent way ethical consumer discourse is employed in its shopping spaces. Upon close inspection of the ideals that the citizen-consumer concept is purported to embody in this specific case study, I identify three ideological contradictions that privilege the goals of consumerism over the goals of citizenship. As a consequence, I argue that consumers generally and scholars of consumerism alike should be cautious about the potential for a balanced citizen-consumer hybrid, particularly as it manifests in a corporate market setting.

While consumer politics attracts increasing scholarly interest (e.g., Hilton 2007; Nelson et al. 2007; Micheletti 2003; Stolle et al. 2005; Barnett et al. 2005; Miller 2001; Sassatelli 2006), studies of ethical consumers frequently focus on specific

³ While positivist analysis focuses on a case’s ability to represent a larger population, in critical theory’s interpretive tradition, cases are used to bridge the nomothetic/ideographic divide: they provide a source of rich descriptive data, but are also important for their ability to extend out to, and engage with, larger theoretical issues and struggles over power (see Burawoy 1998; Steinmetz 2004).

sectors (e.g., fair-trade coffee, organic food), leaving the topic of ethical consumption as a broader phenomena relatively under-theorized (Gabriel and Lang 2005: 39–40). This study contributes to this literature not only by helping to move beyond the hero/victim dichotomy of the ethical consumer, but also by conceptualizing the limits and potential of the citizen-consumer hybrid through an examination of the ideological tensions it embodies in a concrete setting. I ask how one particularly influential corporation contributes to the balance between citizenship and consumer ideals within ethical consumer discourse. In addition, concentrating on the consumption end of the alternative food economy complements recent food scholarship on the contradictions of organic food production (Guthman 2000, 2004; Allen and Kovach 2000), and addresses the neglect of consumer politics in the sociology of food and agriculture (Goodman and DuPuis 2002:5).

The rest of this article is divided into five sections. In the first section, I specify the analytic focus and explain why it is important to interrogate the citizen-consumer hybrid. I also justify the discursive methodological approach employed and the specific case study of Whole Foods Market. In the second section I describe the history of consumer activism in order to understand the contemporary discourse of ethical consumption. The third section presents my analytic strategy for identifying the ideological tensions at play and for evaluating how they compete for dominance in ethical consumer discourse. Evidence from the case study is discussed in the fourth section to illustrate the three ideological tensions inherent in the hybrid concept, and to show how WFM frames the hybrid in ways that privilege consumerism over citizenship goals. I summarize my findings in the fifth section to support my argument that the citizen-consumer hybrid is not a balanced articulation in the case of Whole Foods Market.

Dialectics and contradictions in ethical consumer discourse

Hybrid citizen-consumers and underlying ideological tension

The unifying logic that weaves together the various strands of ethical consumer discourse suggests that commodity choice can satisfy an individual's desire for personal health and happiness while generating sustainability and social harmony for society as a whole. This logic makes plausible the concept of the hybrid citizen-consumer, able to satiate personal desires while simultaneously addressing social and ecological injustices. This 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).⁴ The hybrid citizen-consumer concept potentially broadens our understanding of citizenship by troubling traditional masculine assumptions of citizenship

⁴ Consumerism focuses on individual choice and shopping pleasure, while citizenship generally emphasizes the importance of civil society to channel citizens' rights and responsibilities for the greater public good, or commons (Stevenson 1995:110; Gabriel and Lang 1995; Soper 2007:215). I appreciate that scholars have begun to problematize the citizen-consumer distinction, and describe these ideals and debates below.

that overlook how women's "private" consumption roles contribute to public life, while drawing attention to the interconnections between economic, political, and cultural realms of social life (Jubas 2007:232; Soper 2007:206).

While hopeful, this hybrid concept needs to be theoretically unpacked and empirically explored. More specifically, the hybrid citizen-consumer concept is held together by an ideological tension between consumerism and citizenship – ideologies that are frequently presented as complimentary and seamless through the ubiquitous message of "vote with your dollar." Discourses possess unifying logics, as well as ideological contradictions (Ferree and Merrill 2000:455). Are both citizenship and consumerism coexisting and living well in the citizen-consumer hybrid? If not, what is the nature of the discord? While scholars have begun to explore the theoretical tensions involved with this hybrid concept (see Jubas 2007; Soper 1997), in this article I use a particular case-study to explore what cultural, political-economic, and ecological contradictions are engendered by the hybrid concept, and question whose interests are served in the framing process.

Central to any discussion of the implications of the citizen-consumer hybrid are debates on consumer agency, which raise the following question: in what ways does ethical consumer discourse represent a new realm of consumer empowerment in global markets, and how might it simultaneously suggest a site for social manipulation by market actors? I address this question by focusing on the concept of citizen-consumer, taking care to avoid the pitfall of viewing consumers as either hapless dupes or unencumbered sovereign agents in the global economy. To do so, I draw from Miller's (2001) work on "the dialectic" of shopping spaces, a strategy that investigates the *contradictions* of consumer spaces where an undeniable search for meaning in the shopping mall is shaped by larger institutional forces like corporations. A dialectical focus helps us avoid naïve optimism, or determinist pessimistic accounts of consumer-focused projects for social justice and sustainability. A dialectical approach recognizes that meaning and agency are present in consumption decisions, but takes seriously the structural conditions shaping consumer agency.⁵

Discourse analysis

To study ethical consumer discourse, I draw from the critical sociological tradition of discourse studies, which is inspired by critical theory's interest in power, and post-structuralism's insights about the constitutive effects of language on social life. All discourse analysis begins from the starting point that discourse structures the space in which agency and subjects are constituted. Critically-oriented discourse analysis is not simply interested in how social reality is discursively constructed, but has a particular focus on how discursive activities create, sustain, and legitimate relationships of power and privilege (Fairclough 1992:67; Fairclough and Wodak 1997; Phillips and Hardy 2002:25; Carroll 2004:226). From this perspective, studying

⁵ As Cook (2000) notes, "ample space exists for resistance to structurally given meaning, but this does not alter the fact that capitalist hegemony "depends upon the continual integration of person with commodity" (p. 111).

discourse is not about the pursuit of disembodied texts, but possesses real potential for political engagement; as Fraser (1997) notes, “a conception of discourse can help illuminate how the cultural hegemony of dominant groups in society is secured and contested” (p. 152).

A discursive approach is well suited to an analysis of contradictions, and helps avoid a simplistic dichotomy between consumer dupes versus consumer heroes. Discourse can be understood as a shared way of understanding the world that is unavoidably connected to political power; as such, discourse shapes how social agents do and *do not* respond to social and ecological issues, and constructs normative boundaries of accountability and responsibility (Dryzek 2005; Smith 1997).

Discourse analysis is thus a useful tool for detecting nuance that moves us beyond good/bad dichotomies of ethical consumption, and instead works to theorize the ideological tension that inevitably underlies discourse (Oliver and Johnston 1999; Ferree and Merrill 2000; Carroll 2004: 229). To address the question of how discourse relates to ideology and frames, I draw from Ferree and Merrill (2000) exploration of these terms in a social movement context (p. 455); their work usefully suggests a visual metaphor of an inverted pyramid to describe the relations of discourse, ideology, and frames, with each respective term connoting a more coherent ideational concept at the level of content and specificity (Ferree and Merrill 2000:455). The concept of discourse heads this inverted pyramid, and can be understood as an inherently conflictual realm that “links concepts together in a web of relationships” (Ferree and Merrill 2000:455). Conflict within discourse involve the lower pyramid “layer” of ideologies, which are conceptualized as coherent systems of related ideas that combine explanation with normative prescription (Ferree and Merrill 2000:455–456; Oliver and Johnston 1999).⁶ Frames fall at the bottom of the inverted pyramid; they draw from the supporting ideas and norms of ideologies, but are understood as more specific cognitive structures advanced by social actors to shape interpretation and understanding of specific issues (Oliver and Johnston 1999). Relating this inverted pyramid to my own research goals, my focus in this article is on ethical consumer discourse, the related ideological conflicts between citizenship and consumerism within the hybrid concept of the citizen-consumer, and most specifically, on how these ideological conflicts are framed in the case of WFM.

The case of Whole Foods Market (WFM)

Ethical consumer discourse is constituted through a multiplicity of framing processes. Framing process can be understood as the “mechanism by which

⁶ Social movement scholars have emphasized a value-neutral interpretation of ideologies (Ferree and Merrill 2000, 455–456) to avoid the epistemologically problematic presumption that one can identify “true” causes of oppression. With Fegan (1996) and McLellan (1995), I suggest that a critical perspective on ideology remains key to understanding domination and inequality in socio-cultural arenas. For clarity of language and in keeping with the usage in social movement scholarship, I refer to “consumerism” and “citizenship” as competing ideologies, yet acknowledge that both terms invoke normative ideals that may, or may not be employed ideologically. My emphasis here is not on distinguishing ideology from “truth,” but on identifying on how ideological processes can naturalize and legitimize “ideas in pursuit of dominant interests,” which are not imposed in a crude, top-down fashion, but involve a negotiation between individual subjects and dominant cultural constructions (Fegan 1996:184).

discourses, ideologies and frames are all connected,” and while one actor cannot single-handedly construct a discourse, the output of multiple framing processes by actors works to produce a discourse (Ferree and Merrill 2000:456).⁷ Ethical consumer discourse is framed differently by different actors – actors that range from church groups to consumer cooperatives to publicly traded transnational corporations. The focus of this article is on the relatively neglected, but influential realm of corporate discourse (Gordon 1995). I selected WFM for my case study because this corporation’s market dominance affords it considerable impact on a larger ethical consumer discourse – a discourse loosely organized around the sentiment that shopping creates possibilities for consumers to “change the world” – and the citizen-consumer hybrid concept. While both large and influential, I do not intend to suggest that WFM is omnipotent or exists in a vacuum. To the contrary, its articulation of ethical consumer discourse reflects an ongoing dialectical interaction with activist organizations and a market context that continually pushes the corporation to adapt and evolve. Most famously, WFM developed policies on the humane treatment of animals after John Mackey was confronted with animal rights protestors at the corporation’s annual meeting in 2003 (Singer and Mason 2006:179). John Mackey was subsequently confronted with a damning appraisal of WFM by *New York Times* journalist and University of California Berkeley professor Michael Pollan, in the recent book *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (Pollan 2006) and in a public debate hosted by UC Berkeley. Pollan critiqued WFM for contributing to the rapid corporatization of an increasingly unsustainable organics industry, while Mackey defended WFM business practices and argued that WFM is helping increase sustainability by expanding the accessibility of organic foods. In the public debate with Pollan, Mackey pledged to change certain WFM practices, including maintaining a stronger commitment to providing locally-produced foods.⁸ Although these interactions between the corporation and activist organizations are important to understand the future evolution of the firm, for the sake of analytic clarity, this study is necessarily situated in current debates, and acknowledges the likelihood of changes of direction as the larger terrain of food politics and social movement activism evolves and influences market opportunities.

Data collection

Inspired by Fairclough’s (1992:4) “three-dimensional approach” to the study of social discourse, which emphasizes the importance of situating texts within a larger social context, I focused this case study on collecting textual material and ethnographic observations from Whole Foods Market, while situating the case within a larger context of power and political-economy. Corporate texts were collected through store visits to one WFM location over a 2-year period, with an

⁷ Of course, all of the framing processes constituting discourse can never be captured in a single study. As Phillips and Hardy (2002) write, “[w]e can never study all aspects of discourse and we inevitably have to select a subset of texts for the purpose of manageability” (p. 10).

⁸ For an overview of this debate refer to the webcast provided by the University of California-Berkeley (http://webcast.berkeley.edu/event_details.php?webcastid=19147), as well as Pollan’s open letter to Mackey <http://www.michaelpollan.com/article.php?id=80>, and Mackey’s open letter to Pollan (http://www.wholefoods.com/blogs/jm/archives/2006/05/an_open_letter.html).

average of two research visits per month.⁹ The purpose of these visits was to use unobtrusive methods of data collection to gather ethnographic observations about the shopping experience,¹⁰ and collect textual material to document and analyze how WFM constructs a particular shopping experience that contributes to a larger ethical consumer discourse at a broad level, and constitutes the citizen-consumer subject more specifically.

Case-study data collected included the following: (1) extensive field notes from store visits and participant observation at WFM events such as cooking classes and health seminars;¹¹ (2) textual material printed and promoted by the store such as brochures, napkins, shopping bags, web-site material, and product packaging; and (3) the business press literature on WFM, which was collected and analyzed to understand the context of their success within a larger capitalist economy.¹² The fieldwork data were primarily collected at one particular Whole Foods location (although other store locations were visited); the majority of the textual data (e.g., pamphlets, mission statements, web site content) were not location specific, but had a general orientation to a North American market.

Consumer activists and corporate adaptation

History of consumer activism

How did we get to a point where consumers are responsible for “saving” the world by shopping? How did the idea of “citizen-consumers” emerge? One of the earliest forms of consumer activism is the boycott. The first recorded boycott was in Ireland in 1878 when peasants formed a workers union and refused to harvest the oats of Captain Boycott, demanding better wages and working conditions (Micheletti 2003:38). The boycott has subsequently been used by unions, political activists, and individual consumers as a way to enact political preferences through *anti-consumption* behavior (Micheletti 2003). Although the boycott is viewed as one of the earliest—and longest standing—forms of consumer activism, Gabriel and Lang (2005) usefully separate the history of consumer activism into four phases: (1) the cooperative phase originating in nineteenth-century England; (2) the value for

⁹ Discourse analysis allows for multiple qualitative methods of data collection; “texts” are not simply printed words, but include other materials such as visual sources, spoken words, ethnographic field notes, and artifacts that are collected to understand better a discourse and its underlying ideological conflicts (Grant et al. 1998; Lutz and Collins 1993). Despite these multiple methods, what distinguishes discursive approaches is that they are studied with the objective of understanding a discourse “and its role in constituting social reality” (Phillips and Hardy 2002:10) while maintaining a constructionist epistemology that sees language as central to the constitution of social reality.

¹⁰ The majority of the ethnographic fieldwork was carried out by the author, with additional field work carried out by research assistants to corroborate observations and collect additional impressions.

¹¹ Primary participant observation was focused on the Toronto WFM location; additional field research was collected at the Oakville Ontario, Portland, Oregon, and New York City (Manhattan) locations.

¹² Proquest and EBSCO Host engines (databases that contained mainstream and financial newspapers) were searched generating roughly 1,500 citations, and 700 relevant articles. Also, Internet searches acquired additional information about WFM’s marketing, consumer practices, and labor relations.

money phase that emerged with Fordism; (3) Naderism in post-war USA, and (4) the “alternative consumption” that emerged in the 1980s.

The first, cooperative phase of activism pre-dated Fordism and mass-consumerism, and focused on cooperatives as a means for working people to combat local monopolies that controlled grain milling and the price of food (Gabriel and Lang 2005:41). In these early cooperatives, people saw themselves as both producers and consumers, and the goal was to provide a cooperative model of self-help that could serve as a working-class alternative to the capitalist market logic of self-interest and profit maximization (ibid.) As Matthew Hilton (2003) points out in his history of consumer movements in the UK, cooperatives along with most pre-war consumer movements, were driven by “the politics of necessitous consumption” (p. 29). In the early twentieth-century, for example, the consumer movement in the UK was closely tied to the Labour movement, with working-class consumer activists (including housewives) fighting for affordable food for working-class families, and trying to increase public awareness of how specific commodities engendered political consequences for working people.

Compared to this first cooperative phase of activism, the second “value for money” phase is more accurately labeled *consumer* activism, since it marked the development of activism focused more centrally and exclusively around a consumer identity. According to Hilton (2003), what distinguishes this post-war “best-buy” phase of consumer activism from earlier forms is the shift from concern over necessary commodities (like food and coal) to concern over the politics and prices of luxury items (like electric appliances). The foundations of this shift lay in the increasing separation of consumers from producers in the twentieth-century, the growth of the middle class, unfavorable outcomes of anarchic markets – like the appalling conditions described in Chicago meat yards in Upton Sinclair’s 1906 novel, *The Jungle* – and the mass consumerism of the post-war period (Hilton 2003; Gabriel and Lang 2005). The Great Depression only confirmed public suspicions about untrammelled market forces, and organizations emerged that were designed to help consumers navigate through anarchic markets, and make better purchases in an emerging era of mass consumption. In the UK and the USA alike, value for money consumer organizations tested consumer goods and provided information, an organizational format that ultimately manifested in the widely read magazine in the USA, *Consumer Report*. Upton Sinclair wrote *The Jungle* as a communist hoping to upset bourgeois rule, yet this second wave of consumer activism ultimately worked to improve the functioning of the market, providing better information to enhance consumer choices.

The third phase of consumer activism, Naderism fomented in the particular legal context of the USA, and emphasized the potential dangers of anarchic market forces. Naderism depicted unregulated corporate capitalism as a threat to consumers, as was the case with the poorly designed Chevrolet Corvair that Ralph Nader exposed in his 1965 book, *Unsafe at Any Speed*. Although value for money activism had a top-down focus on providing information to consumers, Naderism emphasized that organized grassroots action and legal campaigns were necessary to force the government to intervene to protect public safety. This period of consumer activism was inspired by Nader’s exposé of the poor safety standards in the automobile industry, as well as his litigious approach to monitoring corporate responsibility and his support for grassroots consumer activism. Similar to the value-for-money wave

of activism, Naderism was focused on consumer access to free and fair information, as well as corporate accountability, although Nader also suggested that individual consumers were more powerful when they acted as citizens – organizing collectively to lobby government, and mobilizing grassroots support to prevent capitalist systems from being dominated by unscrupulous corporate actors prioritizing profit over public safety (Gabriel and Lang 2005:46–48).¹³

While cooperatives, value-for-money, and anti-corporate forms of consumer activism continue to exist today, a fourth phase of consumer activism emerged in the 1980s that Lang and Gabriel term “alternative consumption” and Hilton (2003) terms “ethical consumerism,” but identified in this article as *ethical consumption*. Value for money and Naderist phases of consumer activism were focused on making the market safer for individual consumers, but this fourth phase of ethical consumption originated in concern that collective consumption patterns were unsustainable. A shift away from redistributive class politics towards post-industrial values (e.g., environmentalism) and recognition-based identity politics (e.g., sexual orientation), along with concerns about the social and economic impacts of globalization, helps to explain the emergence of this phase (Hilton 2003). This phase has also been fuelled by a growing “unease with abundance” where a life full of luxury consumer goods is seen to yield little personal or moral satisfaction (Hilton 2003:298; Soper 2007). Environmental awareness grew in the 1970s, particularly with the publication of *Limits to Growth* in the 1970s (Meadows 1972), which identified human consumption as a threat to the survival of the planet and the human species. In the 20 years following the publication of that report, the environmental movement gained considerable ground: large international environmental initiatives were organized like the Brundtland Commission, which published *Our Common Future* (1987); the term “sustainable development” became prominent; and popular understanding of capitalist externalities (e.g., environmental degradation) moved to the forefront of popular discourse (Hajer 1995:10; Seyfang 2004). As environmental awareness grew, the critique of consumer society became divided between a radical message seeking to challenge consumer society and reduce consumption (Gabriel and Lang 1995:6; Seyfang 2004:327), and a second, more popular ameliorative message encouraging consumers to consume carefully or differently – buying hybrid cars, energy efficient appliances, and organic strawberries (Cairncross 1992; Dryzek 2005:189; Gabriel and Lang 1995:182).

The fourth wave’s anti-corporate sentiment

While ethical consumption emerged out of environmentalism, it came to express concern over the panoply of late capitalist concerns ranging from human rights, unfair global trade, sustainability, corporate power, and other concerns of the global social justice (“anti-globalization”) movement. Popular authors and sociologists alike documented the rise of activism critiquing corporate power in the global economy on social and ecological grounds (see Starr 2000; Korten 1995; Karliner

¹³ Gabriel and Lang (1995) note that Naderism has not been readily reproduced in other countries, although they see *Consumers International* – a global network of consumer organizations with representation from 115 countries – as a manifestation of the Naderist stream of consumer activism that has been buoyed by anti-globalization critiques of corporate rule in anarchic market conditions (p. 48).

1997; Klein 2000), and challenging the legitimacy of transnational corporations in an increasingly neo-liberal and anarchic global marketplace (Bello 2002). The 1990s saw the emergence of an anti-sweatshop movement on university campuses (Ross 1997), increased publicity for *AdBusters'* anti-corporate, culture-jamming tactics (Lasn 1999), and legal battles using charter revocation laws to challenge a corporation's "right" to exist (Bakan 2004:157). Corporate boycotts were launched against multiple transnational corporations (e.g., Kraft Foods, WalMart, and Nike) for practices such as the use of genetically engineered ingredients, and the reliance on sweatshop labor. In addition, social activists publicized the link between environmental deterioration and the corporate pursuit of profits (Sklair 2001:198–247), contributing to an anti-corporate "bad mood rising" documented and popularized by authors, such as Naomi Klein in her best-selling tome, *No Logo* (2000), and films such as *The Corporation* (Bakan et al. 2004).

Although ethical consumption activism has taken on multiple targets, food has been central to the struggle. Food shopping is not simply a banal, private concern, but represents a key private/public nexus, as well as a potential entry-point to political engagement. This understanding draws from feminist understanding of social reproduction, which emphasize that food choices are not neutral, private matters, but rather represent a politicized, gendered, and globalized terrain where gendered labor and households intersect with states, capital, and civil society in varying balances (Katz 2003:257). Agriculture has been a key target of environmental activism, given its role as one of the largest, if not the largest, industries responsible for environmental devastation and greenhouse gases (Shrybman 2000) as well as concern over rural decline and the loss of the family farm. The fair-trade movement has piggy-backed on the anti-corporate messages of some global justice activism by emphasizing that many of the worst abuses in the global system are associated with foods that are integrated into our everyday life through transnational commodity chains – sugar, bananas, coffee, chocolate – magnifying consumers' complicity in social abuses associated with their production. The fourth wave of ethical consumer activism has used these everyday foods as leverage points to generate reflexivity, encouraging consumers to think critically, buy more selectively, and seek out information on the environmental and social costs involved in their daily meals.

Corporate adaptation and response

It once seemed futile to expect organic produce in large supermarkets, but now WalMart shoppers can choose between conventional and organic products. In part, this change reflects how corporations have responded to the rise of ethical consumption activism, and its effective politicization of food issues in the public imagination.¹⁴ Many corporations, like WFM, offer consumers an opportunity to "make a difference" by purchasing products like organic foods and shade-grown coffee. There is a vast literature that tries to explain why companies have reformed

¹⁴ The state of our knowledge on consumer activism makes it is difficult, if not impossible, to parse out the impact of ethical consumer activism on corporations versus the pressures from other "ethical" voices like the media, the state, market competitors, and other members of civil society (Crane 2006: 220).

their practices, and overall, these shifts in corporate behavior are understood as responses to public, government, and media pressure for reform, as well as a positive business opportunity that opens up new markets and increases efficiency (Heald 1988; Prakash 2000; David 1991; Vogel 2005). Although much of the business literature sees ethical consumption as a win–win opportunity (as per the “triple bottom line” that provides for people, the planet, and profits), critical questions are being raised. Scholars are scrutinizing corporate responses to consumer activism that range from superficial name-changes (e.g., tobacco giant Philip Morris became “Altria” in 2004, and part of Monsanto became “Pharmacia”), to the mandate for “corporate social responsibility,”¹⁵ to sustainable development initiatives (Johnston 2003).¹⁶

This article extends these questions to ethical consumer discourse, examining the manifestation of the citizen-consumer in the case of one prominent corporate actor, Whole Foods Market. Questions are focused on the hybrid citizen-consumer, an idea that seems to indicate the presence of moral regulation in the marketplace. The notion of consumers “voting with their dollars” has obvious populist appeal. As buying guides frequently remind shoppers, every shopping decision is an opportunity to cast a vote. But do the transformative aspirations of ethical consumption activism enable transformative outcomes, particularly when they are taken up by corporations? There is no simple “yes” or “no” answer to this question, since there are reasons for hope (Schor 2007) as well as cause for critical concern. Thomas Frank’s (1998) seminal work, *The Conquest of Cool*, describes the extraordinary ability of corporations to transform counter-cultural themes of rebellion and disenchantment into marketing opportunities (see also Heath and Potter 2004; Frank and Weiland 1997). Further, a key characteristic of post-Fordist society is not a mass market of uniform products and conformist consumers, but niche markets where specialized goods and services allow consumers to achieve distinction through carefully crafted identities and lifestyles (Turow 2000). From a critical perspective, ethical consumer strategies seem more like niche marketing opportunities allowing corporations to target privileged, conscientious consumers, than a substantive program for health, sustainability, and social justice at a global scale.

Positive accounts of consumer activism

Although ethical consumer strategies may appear complicit with capitalist marketing strategies and corporate co-optation, it seems myopic to dismiss summarily ethical

¹⁵ Much recent scholarship has cast considerable doubt on the ability of CSR to make tangible progress toward global environmental and social improvement (Vogel 2005; Locke 2006), and identified instances of corporate “greenwashing”, where companies put forward an environmentally friendly image but do little actually to reform their operations (Athanasiou 1996; Karliner 1997; Sutton 2004).

¹⁶ There is an untapped opportunity for social movement scholars to engage with critiques of corporate adaptation. While social movement scholars have identified the need to assess social movements’ impact on the state, other movements, and political-culture (Guigni et al. 1999; Gamson 1975; Meyer and Whittier 1994; Eyerman and Jamison 1998), little work has been to address the impact of social movement activism on corporate actors – even though activists and scholars alike emphasize the power of corporations in public life (Sklair 2001; Bakan 2004). Social movement scholars have elaborated new ways of thinking about transnational resistance (Keck and Sikkink 1998) and have examined specific campaigns targeting corporate globalization (Johnston and Laxer 2003; Evans et al. 2002; Carty 2002), but to avoid fetishizing these cases of resistance in the global justice movement, there is a need to gain greater insight into social change processes involving social movement critique and market adaptation.

consumer activism and its myriad projects for social change. A one-sided view of consumer cooptation seems deterministic and methodologically closed to the possibilities of new forms of consumer activism (Schor 2007; Miller 2007: 225, 229), as well as the historical intersections between counter-cultural movements and industry innovation (Turner 2006). Schor argues that the time is ripe for dialectical approaches that transcend a simple analysis of corporate cooptation,¹⁷ and instead engage with the dynamic interactions between consumer movements and market actors.

Certain ethical consumer products, like fair-trade commodities, generate a price premium (Ransom 2001; Raynolds 2000) that addresses the social and ecological externalities of these commodity chains and suggests possibilities for an expansive “spatial dynamics of concern” (Goodman 2004). Coffee producers, for instance, achieve a higher price through fair-trade markets than through conventional coffee markets (Hudson and Hudson 2004; Raynolds 2002). While the entry of large capitalist firms into organic food production may have diluted core principles (Guthman 2004), by most accounts, organic farming techniques are less ecologically harmful than their conventional counterparts (Allen and Kovach 2000). The slow food movement argues that the pleasures of local, artisan foods is not a bourgeois privilege, but an entry point into issues of equality, sustainability, and resistance to corporate encroachment in the lifeworld (Labelle 2004; see Petrini 2001). More generally, feminist philosopher Kate Soper (2004, 2007) argues for the possibilities of an “alternative hedonism” where affluent citizen-consumers use personal consumption as an entry-point to larger political projects.

Many continue to insist on either/or answers: are ethical consumers fodder for corporate marketing campaigns capitalizing on the rise of consumer concern, or does ethical consumption represent a new, radical form of activism where citizen-consumers satisfy both their self-interest *and* their responsibilities to others? A desire for a simple answer is understandable, however a binary approach proves intellectually and politically unsatisfying and suggests the importance of looking to concrete cases – of consumer movements, consumer organizations, and their corporate counterparts (my focus here) – to investigate dialectically the possibilities and contradictions of the citizen-consumer hybrid in ethical consumer discourse.

Beyond good and bad: identifying adjudication criteria

Understanding citizens and consumers as competing ideal types

Ethical consumer discourse and the hybrid citizen-consumer concept, more specifically, contain a unifying logic suggesting that consumers can shop to satisfy their desires while producing an optimal social outcome. Despite this unifying logic, I argue that ethical consumer discourse contains a marked ideological conflict between consumerism and citizenship. The terms consumerism and citizenship are

¹⁷ For a critique of “co-optation” theory, see Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007). Although this critique usefully identifies potential limitations of a monolithic understanding of market cooptation of social movement ideals, I question the accuracy of suggesting that there is a unified body of “co-optation” theory that represents a “conventional theoretical standpoint,” since theories of co-optation come from multiple disciplines, and tend to emerge from the analytic margins rather than a disciplinary core.

conceptually baggy in everyday parlance, leading to the commonplace observation that consumers now practice citizenship through their shopping decisions.¹⁸ It is not that consumers can never behave as citizens at the grocery store or shopping mall, but rather, it becomes necessary to unpack exactly what is meant by these terms, and what ideological conflicts are glossed over in the citizen-consumer hybrid. In this section, I systematically unpack consumerism and citizenship as ideologically competing ideal types to see better how they function in the broader discourse of ethical consumption.

The concept of the citizen-consumer has evolved out of, and alongside consumerism, and shares many of its basic assumptions and principles. While “consumption” refers fairly straightforwardly to “using up” goods and services, consumerism refers to an ideology suggesting a way of life dedicated to the possession and use of consumer goods (Kellner 1983:74), rooted in the capitalist necessity of selling an ever-expanding roster of commodities in a globalized economy (Gottdiener 2000:281; Sklair 2001). Consumerism prioritizes commodity consumption, and suggests that “the best organized societies are those that place consumer satisfaction at the centre of all their major institutions” (Sklair 2001:5; Stevenson 1995:110; Gabriel and Lang 1995). According to the related “consumer sovereignty ideal,” consumers are not only the lucky beneficiaries of mass consumerism, but actually possess the power to drive the economy by determining what goods and services will be made available (Dickinson and Carsky 2006:29).

Mass consumerism was ushered in with Fordism – an unprecedented economic arrangement that linked mass production with mass consumption. Fordist consumption is distinguished from the consumption patterns of earlier centuries where commodity choice was largely restricted to wealthy elites. The democratization of the idea of commodity choice was, and remains central to consumerism. As Gabriel and Lang (2006) write: “[w]hat sets modern consumption apart from earlier patterns is not merely the growth of spending power across social classes and strata, but, more importantly, the experience of choice as a generalized social phenomenon. No earlier social period afforded the social masses the *choice* of what to spend surplus cash on after the means of subsistence had been met” (p. 12). Consumerism presents a world where individual consumer choice is the optimal social condition. Choice is not only central to what consumers do in the marketplace (e.g., they must choose between literally thousands of commodities in a grocery store), but it is also central to the meaning attached to modern consumption and a modern self who makes autonomous choices expressing a unique identity (Taylor 1992:28), and whose sense of freedom is intimately connected to consumer choice (Bauman 1998). Put differently, modern consumption changed not just what people purchased, but the ideas and *meanings* around consumption, with a particular focus on the construction of identity through autonomous consumer choice (Glennie and Thrift 1992: 429).

While consumerism relates strongly to choice and self-interest, when we put “citizenship” under the analytic microscope, we see a much different picture. The meaning of citizenship has been a hotly debated topic since the time of Aristotle, and one that determines the vision of public life under debate (Beiner 2006). While

¹⁸ For example, the recent RED campaign (November/December 2007) at the GAP asks the question on store signage, “Can the shirt off my back change the world?” and then answers, “Yes, this one can.”

political philosophers have traditionally understood citizenship as membership in a state or political community (e.g., Marshall 1992), I broaden the meaning of citizenship beyond the state-container of formal politics to encompass citizenship's political-economic and political-ecological dimensions. This way of viewing citizenship sees the citizen as part of collective struggles to reclaim and preserve the social and ecological commons.

A commons-based conceptualization of citizenship is not an idealist construction imposed from the top-down, but is rooted in already existing social struggles. The idea of "reclaiming the commons" is a phrase increasingly heard in the global justice movement (Goldman 1997, 1998:14; Johnston 2003; Klein 2001), and reflects a general interest in reorienting economies away from an exclusive focus on commodification and profit maximization, and towards a more equitable and sustainable provisioning of human needs.¹⁹ Hyper-commodification on a global scale can be understood as an enclosure of the commons, a development that threatens self-reliance and raises questions about the long-run sustainability of human societies (e.g., Clark and York 2005). This enclosure has led social movements worldwide to call for public policy interventions and organizing efforts by citizens to "create a parallel economy of care and connection that can counter the negative effects of the domination caused by the economy of commoditization" (Mano 2002:99). A commons-based understanding of citizenship does not necessarily mean that markets or individual consumption styles are eradicated.²⁰ However, the citizen-commons ideal type suggests that markets must be re-embedded in social structures so that basic goods, like nutritious sustainable food, do not only go to those who can afford it, and that alternate, non-commodified modes of needs provisioning – through needs reduction and cooperative provisioning – are equally developed (e.g., collective kitchens, community gardens, state-sponsored school meal programs).²¹ While consumerism maximizes individual self-interest through commodity choice, the citizen-commons ideal prioritizes the collective good, which means that individual self-interest and pleasure can be trumped in the interest of improving sustainability or access to the commons. In short, citizenship struggles to reclaim the

¹⁹ While the commons have been defined in many ways, philosopher John McMurtry (1999) usefully describes them as "human agency in personal, collective or institutional form which protects and enables the access of all members of a community to basic life goods" (p. 204). Life-goods are distinguished from a commodity using two criteria: (1) freedom from a price barrier (while markets can be used to distribute life goods, they cannot be restricted to those with resources), and (2) the property of enabling vital life-capabilities which includes not just the capacity to be physically alive, but the broad human range of thinking, acting, and feeling (McMurtry 2001: 827, 837).

²⁰ As Goldman (1998) insists, "[m]aintenance of the commons is thus one of the legs on which commodity production stands," a fact that is increasingly recognized by capitalists themselves: "These 'defenders' of the commons (many of which are in the business of expanding access to private property and surplus-value production) argue that the sustainability of private-property regimes is actually completely dependent upon the maintenance of non-private property of the commons." (pp. 16, 6).

²¹ This introduces complex debates about the possibilities and limitations of working with markets that cannot be explored here. For a discussion of the historical importance of markets in capitalism, see Wood (1999); on the connections between markets and ecological exhaustion, see van der Pijl (2001). A more positive assessment of markets and the environment is found in Hawken et al. (2000), but Guthman (2000) assesses market dynamics in organic agriculture and reaches more pessimistic conclusions (pp. 305–306).

commons are collective, needs-oriented, and emphasize responsibility to ensure the survival and well being of others – human and non-human.

How consumer choice operates ideologically

While citizenship struggles to reclaim the commons resonate with global justice social movements, consumerism remains a powerful cultural force – a “ubiquitous and ephemeral” force that is “arguably *the* religion of the late twentieth century” (Miles 1998:1). Yet consumerism’s ubiquity is not an automatic indictment, and to provide greater critical precision, I ask a more specific question: how does consumerism operate ideologically?

Ideological processes are understood as those that naturalize and legitimize ideas in service of dominant interests. Ideas are not imposed from the top-down, but rather, hegemony²² is created through a negotiation between individual subjects and dominant cultural constructions shaped by political-economic power (Fegan 1996:184). Although critical theory has a long tradition of condescension towards quotidian consumer pleasures, analysts should not underestimate the strong popular and emotional attachments to the idea of choice associated with consumerism, particularly since it is a rare arena of significant, tangible personal choice in modern life (Slater 1997:27). By offering a maximum number of choices to appeal to a wide variety of consumers, consumers can shape their self-concept and create an identity. If one’s conscience is troubled by the global mal-distribution of wealth or ecological deterioration, one has a *choice* to buy fairly traded and organically produced goods. By harnessing the power of consumer choice, ethical consumption appears to shape the market in a way that preserves the environment, addresses poverty, and promotes democracy. Exercising consumer choice appears as both a viable and convenient strategy – particularly when compared to the onerous demands of social movement organizations or trade unionism. Consequently, ethical shopping guides commonly emphasize how changing the world is “easy” when you focus on shopping for justice or sustainability.²³

While the idea of consumer choice has a powerful cultural resonance, its role in ethical consumer discourse raises difficult questions. First, it is worth noting that the idea of “voting with your dollar” is not an invention of social justice activists or environmentalists, but is fundamentally rooted in classical market theory. Early in the nineteenth-century, Austrian economist Frank Fetter wrote, “every buyer ... determines in some degree the direction of industry. The market is a democracy where every penny gives the right to vote” (quoted in Dickinson and Carsky

²² A neo-Gramscian use of the concept of hegemony emphasizes that elites cannot rule by force alone – cultural leadership is required to achieve cultural consent, which reinforces class inequality and often works to suppress critical thinking by its appearance common sense. While power is concentrated in key capitalist agents and organizations, a neo-Gramscian approach also see power and agency at the “bottom,” resting in the hands of civil society and social movements (e.g., Johnston 2001; Carroll 1992).

²³ For example, in one book entitled *It's Easy Being Green: A Handbook for Earth-Friendly Living* (Trask 2006), the author writes that “Adopting better habits and ways of doing things doesn't require riches, inordinate discretionary time or overhauling your life, but these could be a few of the misperceptions that inhibit more Americans from acting on their predilection for a healthy environment” (p.10). The back cover furthermore lets us know that we can become green “without the fuss.”

2006:25). Similarly, the ideal of consumer sovereignty – consumers determining what goods and services are produced through their individual and independent consumer votes – was introduced by the economist William H. Hutt in 1934 (*ibid.*, 28). With the rise of neo-liberal governance in the 1980s, the idea of consumer choice as freedom gained resonance. Milton and Rose Friedman wrote in 1980:

When you vote daily in the supermarket, you get precisely what you voted for, and so does everyone else. The ballot box produces conformity without unanimity; the marketplace, unanimity without conformity (Friedman and Friedman 1980).

With the era of ethical consumption activism, the idea of voting with your dollar was taken up to serve ends of sustainability and social justice (Dickinson and Carsky 2006). What is often overlooked with the grafting of consumer voting onto progressive causes, however, is the knotty relationship between individual consumer choice and self-interest. In the progressive version of “voting with your dollar,” it is not clear what happens to self-interest—the fundamental principal of market theory that assumes an optimal outcome is produced when individual consumers maximize their “utility” by prioritizing self-interest (Slater 1997:28–9). How and when is self-interest trumped by a concern for others, or for the social and ecological commons? What kind of shopping spaces encourage the abnegation of self-interest, and what shopping spaces create an appearance of beneficence while reinforcing the hegemonic ideals of self-interest and unlimited consumer choice? With the ideal of consumer choice enjoying widespread cultural hegemony, it seems particularly challenging to create market spaces that markedly restrain consumer choice and self-interest in the name of collective good. What is easier to sustain in a model of consumer voting is the idea of voluntary beneficence – a model that sustains an extremely flexible accounting of ethical consumer action in the marketplace. In this context, suppressing one’s self-interest, and acting on concern for the larger good through shopping decisions is depicted as just one choice among many. Consumer considerations beyond self-interest become a laudable, but ultimately a voluntary addition, since self-interested shopping behavior and freedom of choice remain broadly sanctioned ideals in consumer culture.

The contemporary manifestation of “voting with your dollar,” or voluntary consumer beneficence, emerged in the context of a neo-liberal mode of governance that attained global prominence from the late 1970s, and that has proven an effective way of governing political subjects through self-regulation (Johnston and Laxer 2003:40; Rose 1999).²⁴ With neo-liberal governance, the realm of formal political citizenship retracted as transnationalized states deferred to capital (Robinson 2001), and democratic deficits emerged leaving everyday citizens feeling disenfranchised from the formal political process (Bauman 1999; Putnam 2000; Nye 2001). While

²⁴ To be clear, acceptance of neo-liberalism is not globally uniform, and important exceptions exist, particularly in China, Malaysia, and now in the “pink tide” of left-leadership in South America. The status of consumer organizations and state regulation is also not identical in Europe and North America. In contrast to the bottom-up consumer organizations found in North America, Burgess (2001) describes how state-sponsored consumer organizations in the EU work with an overarching regulatory state to re-gain the legitimacy lost with the diminishment of Keynesian welfare state models (p. 96).

formal opportunities for citizenship seemed to retract under neo-liberalism, opportunities for a lifestyle politics of consumption rose correspondingly. Neo-liberal governance actively promoted the idea of consumer choice in the market as a worthy complement to, and even substitute for the citizenship ideal of democratic participation. With the deregulation of the market and the devolution of welfare states, consumer authority was valorized from both the right and the left of the political spectrum. Tony Blair’s “third way” Labor government, for example, emphasized not government’s role to redistribute wealth, but increasing consumer choice in access to public services (Perris 2003; Clarke 2007). As states deferred responsibility for environmental regulation, consumers became increasingly responsible to self-manage environmental risks through consumption decisions. The president of Consumer International described consumer movements as “the regulators of the market in a globalized world” while working towards “a fair and just society” (Burgess 2001:101).

While consumers have gained increased responsibility as regulators of the neo-liberal global economy, shopping choices have always had political implications, as per the long-standing feminist insight that social reproductive work like grocery shopping and cleaning involves both power and politics.²⁵ Understanding the political potential of grocery shopping and food choice leads me, along with feminist scholars of social reproduction to question, “how hegemony is secured – or might be frayed – in the overlapping spaces where home and work, the public and the private, state and society converge” (Mitchell et al. 2003:19). More specifically, how is hegemony secured or challenged through ethical consumer discourse as framed by Whole Foods Market? To answer this question, we need to spell out more explicitly what kind of adjudication criteria can be used to evaluate ideological struggles over consumerism and citizenship in the Whole Foods Market case study.

Evaluating the citizen-consumer hybrid

To avoid reducing consumer politics to bourgeois piggery, or uncritically lauding citizen-consumers as the new revolutionary agents, we can draw from social theory to develop criteria that allow us to evaluate specific empirical instances of food

²⁵ Academic understanding of social reproduction has advanced beyond a narrow interpretation of child-rearing, and connected globalized capitalism to the ecological and social reproduction of the labor force (Katz 2003; Micheletti et al. 2004:2; Hochschild and Ehrenreich 2003). Globalization scholarship has traditionally focused on the realm of production, yet the importance of social reproduction as a realm of necessity, vital for both social and ecological sustainability, has been highlighted by feminist geographers (Katz 2003), political economists (Sousa Santos 1995; van der Pijl 2001), and ecological philosophers (McMurtry 2001). With neo-liberal reforms, cut-backs to the public sector and expanded markets worked to shift the work of social reproduction out in two directions: *first*, to charity-based organizations and non-profit organizations providing services for marginalized populations, and *second*, to private corporations who provide services for those who can afford them, relying on the labor of marginalized transnational workers from the Global South (Katz 2003:256; Hochschild and Ehrenreich 2003). While affluent consumers may actively choose private commodity choices (e.g., private nannies, personal chefs), it is important to note that privatized consumer choices lack the universality-principles of welfare states, and the end result is the large-scale privatization of social reproduction in the twenty-first century (Mitchell et al. 2003:17). Whole Foods Market represents a key corporate component of the privatization of social reproduction, offering choices like prepared meals, a one-stop shopping format offering conventional foods and organics/fair-trade, and the opportunity to “feel good about where you shop.”

politics more accurately (Johnston 2007). Juxtaposing the ideologies of citizenship and consumerism with empirical case-studies can help avoid empty polemics by shedding light on how ideological conflicts over consumerism and citizenship play out in concrete cases. The complexity of on-the-ground food politics compels us to abandon the search for ideologically “pure” agents of domination and resistance, and instead look for points of contradiction, change, and ideological struggle.

Building on the discussion of consumerism and citizenship as ideal-types outlined above, the criteria suggested here (summarized in Table 1) are used to discuss the contradictions in Whole Foods Market’s framing of the citizen-consumer hybrid. I investigate how well this framing serves norms of consumerism and citizenship in three distinct domains of social life that have significant implications: culture, political economy, and political ecology. These three domains are borrowed from Katz’s (2003) analysis of the political and ideological implications of social reproductive work (pp. 258–259). In the table below, the rows present the three domains, and the columns of the table contrast consumerism with citizenship. The case study provides evidence for one particularly influential instantiation of the hybrid concept, allowing an assessment of how WFM’s framing of the concept balances consumerism and citizenship.

At the level of culture, an ideology of consumerism emphasizes the maximization of individual choice and variety, whereas citizenship encourages the bracketing of self-interest and the restriction of choice in the interest of collective solutions to achieve social justice and ecological integrity – in other words, to reclaim and preserve the commons. At the level of political-economy, consumerism links consumption to enhanced social status, as well as the maximization of one’s own class status and well-being through consumption – a phenomenon observed from Veblen (1994) to Bourdieu (1984). Consumer markets are highly valued, since markets are seen as providing sovereign consumers with what they want and need, and offer an acceptable and desirable means to achieve social status and upward mobility. In contrast, an ideology of citizenship based on responsibility to a social and ecological commons advocates greater equality in needs provisioning so that life’s essentials, like food, do not simply go to those who can afford them. The regulative power of the market is restricted, and community-based values – such as solidarity with others, direct participation in the decisions and labors that affect one’s life and a sense of pleasure gained from re-enchantment with one’s lifeworld – are prioritized (Sousa Santos 1995:40–54; Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen 1999:5). In the

Table 1 Consumerism versus citizenship

	Consumerism: maximizing individual interest	Citizenship: collective responsibilities to a social and ecological commons
Culture	Prioritize individual choice and variety	Limiting individual choice and variety; collective solutions
Political economy	Consumer markets valued; social status through consumption	Equitable access and empowerment for all social classes; markets restricted
Political ecology	Conservation through consumption	Reduce consumption; re-evaluate wants and needs

third realm of political ecology, consumerism supports the conservation of nature through consumption, buying more “green” products in substitution for regular products (e.g., environmentally friendly disposable diapers), or buying products and services that construct a personal communion with nature (e.g., rainforest jungle tours or rainforest themed breakfast cereal). In contrast, a commons-focused ideology of citizenship advances disengagement with consumerism and reduced consumption, drawing from the political-ecological insight that current consumption levels of affluent populations are unsustainable and draw from the commons of peripheral regions (Durning 1992; Zavestocki 2001).

To be clear, the point of this ideal-type comparison is not to present the consumer and citizen as two different empirical subjects that exist in separate and isolated bodies. Instead, it is intended as a heuristic tool to elucidate how consumerism and citizenship represent two very different explanatory frameworks and normative ends – ends that are not easily reconciled in the citizen-consumer hybrid. In the next section, I document WFM’s framing process, analyzing how it adjudicates between these competing ideal-types, and looking for terminal points – contradictions within ethical consumer discourse that are glossed over discursively, but nonetheless seem irresolvable, or at least deeply troubled, within the hybrid concept of the citizen-consumer.

Case study: How WFM frames the citizen consumer hybrid

Real Food.

Amazing Flavors.

Fantastically Fun.

–Whole Foods Market Pamphlet (WFM 2007a)

To investigate the viability of the citizen-consumer in ethical consumer discourse, in this section I examine WFM’s framing of citizen-consumers to specify and illustrate what kind of contradictions exist in this hybrid concept. Before proceeding, it is worth noting that WFM depicts the corporation itself as an ethical actor, and its shopping spaces represent an opportunity to observe the citizen-consumer concept put into practice. WFM stores project an image of a feel-good business engaged with the local community, protecting the environment, distributing the food of local farmers, promoting employee well-being, and above all, servicing customers’ desire for delicious food they can feel good about. Indeed, WFM stores boast myriad displays about healthy living, organic agriculture, local farmers, and their place at the heart of WFM’s corporate activities. CEO and founder John Mackey describes WFM as building a “new business paradigm” that puts customers ahead of shareholders, raises the living standard of the world’s population, and has a “fundamental responsibility to create prosperity for society and the world” (CBS 2004). According to Mackey, doing business within this “new [ethical] business paradigm” is not just a livelihood, but “a holy calling” (CBS 2004), and he insists that the “brand of business” has gained an undeserved bad reputation globally given that “business and capitalism are helping increase prosperity throughout the world”

(Maravillosa 2006).²⁶ WFM's incredible growth rests partly upon the aggressive business acumen of Mackey, but its commercial success suggests a retail environment that resonates with consumers.

WFM's framing of ethical consumption clearly presents the corporation as an ethical actor, this article, however, has a more specific focus: how the WFM shopping experience frames shopping as an ethical activity, as per the citizen-consumer hybrid. The WFM declaration of interdependence declares its ambition to turn customers into "advocates for whole foods" (WFM 2004a). The stores offer a high degree of organic and natural products, and many of these products contain messages on their packaging about the ecological contradictions of mainstream agriculture and food production. These messages are often echoed by WFM promotional materials appearing throughout the store (a phenomenon that I explore in more detail below). The popular prepared food section, furthermore, offers more ethical takes on classic take-out items like organic rotisserie chickens and homemade soups. Other promotional materials designed by WFM emphasize the absence of products with artificial preservatives, colors, sweeteners, or flavors, the fact that 5% of after-tax profits are donated to charity, and that executive salaries are limited to 14 times those of frontline staff. WFM also promotes itself as an ethical work environment that is kind to "whole people," thereby tying the shopping experience to labor justice. In short, the WFM retail space appears constructed to distinguish itself, its clientele, and its products from a culinary mainstream marked by fast-food and generic mass-market foods associated with ill-health, poverty, obesity. This is reiterated by the WFM website:

[m]any customers have shunned the burger joints and corporate cafeterias for the tasty and more healthful fare of dishes such as enlightened fried rice, earthy quinoa and couscous salads, and tangy sesame-crusting salmon. It's not fast food; it's good food that customers can pick up quickly. (WFM 2000b).

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 "feel-good and do-good" message on everything from food packaging to in-store signage to paper napkins. By combining these messages with an extensive range of prepared

²⁶ To be clear, CEO John Mackey speaks plainly to the business press about the company's aggressive growth strategies, which he presents as complementary with an ethical orientation: "[t]here's this notion that you can't be touchy-feely and serious. ... We don't fit the stereotypes." (Fishman 1996:103). Indeed, WFM is deeply competitive internally and externally. Top-down corporate hierarchies are supplemented with self-managed "teams" where team members are voted in (or out) of full-time jobs by other team members after a 30 day trial period. Stores, and the self-managed "teams" within stores (e.g., produce, bakery), compete to achieve the best performance targets in service, sales, and profitability. Productivity and company bonuses are closely tracked, and directly tied to team's competitive performance (Fishman 1996). As CEO John Mackey explains, "peer pressure substitutes for bureaucracy" (as in Fishman 1996). Externally, competition is also the name of the game in the WFM business paradigm. WFM has absorbed smaller and competing stores in its path to becoming the largest natural foods chain in the world, and has been criticized for opening stores in close proximity to established natural food stores.

and beautifully presented foods, WFM implies that one can shop “responsibly” at the store without sacrificing taste or convenience. This way of framing the shopping experience to maximize consumer pleasure and alleviate the guilt of mass-market consumerism obscures the contradictions of ethical consumption. In the 1960s, the counter-cuisine was openly tormented by multiple contradictions (e.g., Can homemade raspberry jam be made with imported white sugar? Should food coops sell white bread for working class customers? [Belasco 1989:79]). In sharp contrast, WFM frames ethical consumption as a seamless shopping experience where hybrid citizen-consumers can express ethical concerns by eating delicious prepared foods and beautifully-displayed produce in a fun shopping environment. To interrogate this palatable framing of ethical consumption, I employ an analytic framework that investigates contradictions at three levels of social reproduction – culture, political-economy, and political-ecology – and suggest three corresponding ideological contradictions in WFM’s framing of ethical consumption.

Culture: maximum consumer choice with minimum citizenship responsibilities

Whole Foods thinks shopping should be fun. With this [80,000 square foot flagship] store we’re pioneering a new lifestyle that synthesizes health and pleasure. We don’t see a contradiction.

–Whole Foods CEO John Mackey (Matson 2005).

How does WFM present the importance and significance of choice for the citizen-consumer hybrid? In this section, I present evidence to develop my argument that the focus on the maximization of consumer choice at WFM is in contradiction with the requirements of citizenship to relinquish some control over consumer choice for the sake of the commons. Although citizenship does not require eliminating consumer choice, it does require that consumer choice is de-centered as the paramount, guiding value.

Offering consumers as many options as possible is a key business strategy for WFM. The company provides an astonishing variety of foods in large, well-stocked stores; not only are most WFMs larger than most natural food stores, but some are almost twice as large as an average grocery store.²⁷ WFM offers consumers foods touted as beneficial for the environment, safe for wildlife, or made under fair labor conditions, but, significantly, it also stocks “conventional” products where special concern for sustainability, workers’ rights, or social justice is not apparent. Product choices are vast, despite the fact that WFM promises to stock only natural, high quality ingredients. One research trip to Whole Foods documents 25 different

²⁷ WFM has traditionally built stores in the 31,000 square foot range, but is planning to build 58 new stores in the 50,000 square foot range. The flagship Austin store is 80,000 square feet; the industry average for a grocery store is 34,000 square feet (Matson 2005).

varieties of natural macaroni and cheese, 129 varieties of boxed cereal, 147 different kinds of chips, puffs, popcorn, and nachos, and 72 different kinds of bottled water (that takes up an entire aisle in the store). WFM also sells ready-to-freeze spring water ice cubes in plastic, and on more recent trips I notice the new health item – the plastic-free Sigg bottle imported from Switzerland. The produce section is similarly impressive in its variety, and features a range of exotic items like pomellos and mangosteens from Thailand, tamarillo and granadilla from Colombia, and ugly fruit from Jamaica. Snippets of conversation overheard while browsing the aisles included phrases like, I can't believe what they have here – it's amazing." "I don't even know where to start...." The online cheese selector features an amazing volume of choices: 32 soft cheeses, 10 blue-veined cheeses, 10 grating cheeses, 36 firm cheeses, 74 semi-firm cheeses, and 14 fresh cheeses (WFM 2007c). What does this abundance of choice imply for the balance between consumerism and citizenship?

WFM extols choice as integral to a cultural style where consumerism and citizenship are seamlessly integrated, but if we follow up on the implications of maximal choice, we see that it puts consumer and citizenship ideals out of balance. A heavy reliance on consumerism's key tenet of choice makes for a starkly *limited space to encourage the responsibilities and to develop the knowledge of citizenship*. It is not that consumers can never exercise the responsibilities of citizenship at WFM, but rather, the extensive range of consumer choice is the dominant theme of the WFM experience. How does WFM's framing of the citizen-consumer achieve this appearance of balance, and in what ways does WFM's emphasis on choice undermine the balance between consumer and citizenship ideals?

The first source of the imbalance is the fact that consumer choice renders citizenship responsibilities voluntary, understanding citizenship broadly as a system of individual rights and responsibilities to a civil and natural commons. Unlike citizens, who have a range of *compulsory responsibilities* to multi-scaled political collectivities (e.g., they pay taxes, obey laws, manage natural resources), consumer beneficence is primarily individualistic and voluntary since consumers have the option of taking their "vote" elsewhere.²⁸ Even within the well stocked shelves of WFM, consumers can opt out of citizenship commitments to marginalized populations and ecologies, and prioritize individual self-interest by purchasing cheaper, unsustainable foods that may be industrially produced, out of season, conveniently packaged, or produced using exploited labor. At the same time that WFM consumers purchase these products, they shop in an environment that frames WFM consumers as ethical, healthy, and environmentally conscientious – even though the consumer might end up at the check-out with imported Chilean

²⁸ Not all aspects of citizenship are obligatory since many aspects of political capital and civil society depend on voluntary citizenry efforts; however, the central economic and security/regulatory aspects of the citizen/state nexus depend on compulsory measures that allow governments to reflect the will of the people, and perform services essential to welfare states. While consumerism does mandate some compulsory responsibilities – e.g., the payment of debt – (see Jubas 2007: 241–2), it is primarily defined by individual rights, rather than by its collective obligations, particularly as it occurs in "impersonal markets where ... consumers can make choices unburdened by guilt or social obligations" (Gabriel and Lang 1995:173).

raspberries, a heavily processed and packaged “organic” meal imported from thousands of miles away,²⁹ and a box of General Mills Cereal.³⁰

An emphasis on consumer choice creates an ideological imbalance in a second way. Although WFM sometimes frames consumer choice as a way to meet obligations toward the environment, it more frequently frames consumer choice as a way to meet obligations to the self. WFM frames consumer choice as a potent civic-minded action, even if the action is oriented towards one’s individual health rather than ecological sustainability or social justice.³¹ Evidence for this focus is found in in-store pamphlets under the provocative banner, “*Take Action!*” These in-store pamphlet stands typically include two or three pamphlets on topics like food irradiation and genetic engineering, and a few conclude with the injunctive to contact political representatives to express your concerns about the safety of GE food and irradiation. These are important examples of framing that encourage consumers to behave as citizens, but in general, they are exceptions to the rule. The vast majority of the pamphlets in the “Take Action” section relate to taking action on personal health issues, and include such titles as “A Natural Primer for the Carb Conscious,” “Sugar Conscious,” and “Handling Seafood Safely.” Similarly, the seminars available at the WFM store-kitchens are focused on health and culinary topics, rather than political issues identified by food activists across North America, like food insecurity, corporate concentration in the food system, fast-food advertising to children, or shortening food miles. Sessions at the Portland, Oregon WFM (July 2005) are typical; they included “Cakes and Decorating,” “Gourmet Picnics,” “Sushi 101,” and “Belgian Ale Appreciation.” In general, the value of consumer choice tends to manifest as a powerful way of meeting obligations, but these are mainly obligations to the self rather than citizenship ideals involving collective action to protect the ecological and social commons.

²⁹ In debates over organic standards in the United States, various decisions have favored the entry of large corporations into the organics sector, such as the allowance of factory-farming, food additives, and synthetic chemicals that opened the door to synthetic processed organic foods. Organic processed foods may be free from pesticides and be grown without fertilizers, but the energy used to construct processed foods make them highly problematic on environmental grounds. On average, the food processing industry in the USA uses ten calories of fossil fuel energy to produce one calorie of food energy (Manning 2004:44). However, the political-economic motivation for retailers to promote highly processed foods is strong, since they have more “valued added” and higher profit rates than less processed foods (e.g., eggs, milk, flour), and are found to be featured more prominently in retail displays (Winson 2004).

³⁰ It is worth noting that the role of WFM as an ethical corporation is similarly voluntary; it can choose to support greater animal welfare in its operations, while it simultaneously quashes unionization efforts, refuses to join labor campaigns organized to guarantee labor rights for strawberry pickers, and markets a wide-range of energy-intensive processed foods. WFM’s anti-union policies and strategies are well documented, and linked to Mackey’s libertarian political-economic philosophy. In Mackey’s own words: “basically, labour unions don’t create value.... Fundamentally, they’re parasites. They feed on union dues” (Lubove 2005:42). Mackey wrote and circulated a 19-page position paper entitled, “Beyond Unions” that has been circulated to “team-members” since 1990. Numerous journalistic accounts have documented WFM’s systematic efforts to prevent unionization. In addition, CEO John Mackey, refused to sign a United Farm Workers union petition to guarantee the rights of strawberry pickers in 1998. According to Mackey, “The UFW is trying to coerce us because we won’t sign their damned petition....I’m damned if I’m going to sign.” (Lubove 2005:43).

³¹ I would suggest that this problem extends beyond WFM, and to the realm of lifestyle marketing more generally. Witness the latest Evian water slogan: “The most important body of water is your own”.

A third way in which an emphasis on consumer choice creates an ideological imbalance is through the nature of the information provided to shoppers. Consumer choices are made on the basis of available information. Proponents of the citizen-consumer hybrid argue that if individuals are provided the right information, they will vote with their dollars in ways that enact progressive social change. Does the information available at WFM encourage shoppers to make choices that meet citizenship and consumer ideals equally?

There is considerable variability in the kind of consumer information provided by WFM, and in the modes of its presentation. Compared to conventional supermarkets, WFM provides much more information that educates consumers and allows them to meet their responsibilities as citizens. This occurs, for example, through more extensive labeling than in conventional supermarkets: fresh produce is frequently labeled by origin and production method (organic versus conventional). Fish is also labeled, and information about WFM's wild Alaskan salmon is available in pamphlet form, for example. These labels discern which products are grown without antibiotics, and which one produced with other ecological considerations. Also, as noted earlier, WFM's "Take Action" pamphlet stands do include information on a select number of environmental issues, namely organic standards, genetically engineered foods, methyl mercury in seafood, and irradiation. The WFM website has an "issues" drop-down menu that discusses issues of animal welfare, genetically modified foods, "green action," organics, and seafood sustainability.

While WFM offers information that encourages awareness of citizenship responsibilities, and this information is impressive when compared to conventional big-box shopping, it clearly falls short of balancing consumer and citizenship ideals. WFM deliberately offers conventional industrial commodities to give consumers a "choice," but does not always clarify which labels apply to which products.³² Critics have charged that signage at WFM can be misleading (e.g., displaying photos and profiles of local area farmers above imported and conventionally grown produce; Maloney 2006). Indeed, on several research trips to WFM, the signage around local produce was highly confusing. One large sign in the store featured locally grown cucumbers, yet local cucumbers were nowhere to be found in the produce section. On other visits, signs above produce displays indicated that local growers are supported, but nothing in the produce display below was locally or even regionally produced. The message about local growers sends a potentially confusing message to shoppers: although the signs indicate that eating locally is important, the mere abundance of such varied and exotic produce sends a message that the concern for the local is secondary to an interest in accessing an exceptional degree of exotic fruits and vegetables.

A certain degree of consumer confusion might work to WFM's market advantage. WFM cultivates the feel-good sentiments attached to the multiplicity of ethical consumption labels and brands (organic, fairly-traded, local), while offering cheaper, non-certified food options to draw in a wider range of consumers. For example, I assumed that the WFM's house coffee, Allegro, was grown with fair-trade objectives, even though it did not have an official certified fair-trade approval. It

³² Even within the much narrower field of fair-trade products, the plethora of labeling schemes creates cynicism and obscures understanding of whether certain products are more ethical than others (Hudson and Hudson 2004).

was only upon further investigation on the website, however, that I realized that the only guarantee of social justice to producers is the weak claim that WFM “pay[s] our farming partners a fair price that exceeds their cost of production.” (WFM 2007b). While there is some small comfort in knowing that farmers are not being paid less than their production costs, this information cannot assure me as a consumer that I am meeting my citizenship obligations.

For consumer information fully to support the exercise of citizenship responsibilities, it must contain precise definitions and specific details about food’s production processes. However, words like “natural” and “organic” are used interchangeably in the WFM marketing and promotional literature, a discursive move that does not easily allow the citizen-consumer to distinguish which foods are certified organic, raised by small-scale farmers, or produced with well-paid labor. According to store team leader for WFM in Oakville Ontario, Tanya Kleider, “[a]ll of our food is natural, organic, and delicious” (Blokhuis 2005:B1). This is a puzzling depiction, since WFM also carries conventional corporate products (Heinz Ketchup, General Mills Cheerios), but Kleider describes these as being made in an “old fashioned way – all natural” and as “dat[ing] back to a time when everything was naturally made, the way food used to be, conventional and traditional without the use of pesticides” (Blokhuis 2004:C8).

In summary, although WFM does a better job than conventional supermarkets, the provision of information so central to making choices discourages a balance between consumer and citizenship ideals. In contrast to the confusing, misleading, and incomplete information pertinent to the citizenship side of the hybrid, information for meeting consumer goals of choice maximization is complete and accurate, not to mention stylishly presented and prominently displayed.

The limited presentation of citizenship responsibilities and knowledge in the food system is partly a failure of WFM to present accurate information about the social and ecological factors of food production. Obviously, full disclosure of all information about social and ecological issues (e.g., signage demonstrating the number of energy calories used to produce prepared foods, or import lettuce thousands of miles) would not make sense in a market-economy. However, is it clear that the focus on consumer-choice relates not just to failings on the part of WFM, but the limitations of a consumer-sovereignty model of social change. The progressive version of consumer sovereignty – achieving social change by consumers ‘voting’ with their dollars – employs myriad assumptions that are not always reflected in real-world shopping. This model presupposes perfect consumer information, and an educated, knowledgeable consumer who has the time and energy to read labels and adjudicate serious matters of ecological risk and social welfare on a trip to the grocery store.³³ It also presupposes consumers who are willing to restrict their choices and their self-interest in order to achieve more sustainable, or socially-just outcomes. The limits of consumer sovereignty raises not just questions about WFM’s would-be citizen-consumers, but it also raises questions about the extent to which consumer choice can be the primary regulator of a corporate-controlled, market-driven food system.

³³ A report by the LOHAS-focused market-researchers, the Hartman Group, warned producers not to overestimate consumers’ ethical or health commitments, since their research indicated not only that “consumers are undisciplined,” but that consumers react negatively to too much information about a product. http://www.hartman-group.com/products/HB/pf2005_06_16.html.

Before concluding, I want to illustrate further the limitations of choice in balancing consumer and citizenship ideals by taking the case of wild Pacific salmon – a fish threatened with extinction as fish farms expand globally. The state’s ability to manage fisheries has been a colossal disaster (as in the case of the Atlantic Cod), yet it is not clear whether consumer choice and voluntary benevolence are the solution versus an improved state regulatory agency or a transnational agency with teeth to punish over-fishing and ban unsustainable fish-farming practices. According to the ideology of consumer sovereignty, the responsible citizen-consumer can choose wild fish that appears healthier (contains less PCBs than farm-raised salmon) and more sustainable (farmed salmon spread fish lice which deplete wild stocks). Even if the citizen-consumer can acquire this information, find wild salmon (90 percent of the salmon sold in North American is farmed), and overlook the much higher price tag (wild salmon is often twice the price of its farmed counterparts), will this kind of “consumer regulation” alone protect this endangered food source? Who, if not a state regulator, will protect the remaining wild-stock from over-fishing and extinction (which becomes a more serious problem with increased consumer demand for wild salmon)? Who will deal with the ecological risks present from escaped farm salmon (numbering in the millions)? Who will sanction market actors who are unwilling or unable to self-regulate?

In summary, the dominance of consumerism in the consumer-citizen hybrid at WFM reveals some of the contradictions of the citizen-consumer hybrid, and ethical consumer discourse more generally. This citizen-consumer as framed by WFM does restrict some consumer choices (e.g., foods with artificial flavors, meats raised with a regular feed of antibiotics), but it does not substantially de-center consumer choice in the interest of broader citizenship responsibilities to restrict self-interest and preserve the commons. By emphasizing the impact of consumer choice, the importance of citizen-solutions, like state regulation (e.g., banning farm salmon to protect wild stocks) is largely invisible in the WFM retail space. WFM framing legitimizes ethical consumers as pleasure-seeking agents who naturally behave ethically when provided maximum choice and information, yet provides only partial processes of commodity de-fetishization, and offers a range of choices that frequently support self-interest more than the collective good (e.g., purchasing long-distance strawberries or heavily-packaged prepared meals). Promoting consumer pleasure and commodity choice is a much easier sell for WFM than promoting the knowledge and responsibilities of citizenship, particularly if these lofty ideals demand consumer restraint and limit choices to bio-regional, fairly-produced foods. At the same time, multiple failings and crises in the food sector suggest the importance of a greater degree of citizen-based politics and state action to promote equitable food access, sustain ecological resources, and protect workers’ rights – which leads us to the political-economic contradictions in WFM’s framing of ethical consumption.

Political economy: class (un)consciousness and feeling good about where you shop

Whole Foods is not a business for a clique, or for the elite. We wanted the philosophy of the stores to spread throughout the culture. We wanted to change the world.

–John Mackey, CEO of WFM (Fishman 2004:76)

Consumption serves many purposes besides the procurement of life's necessities (Bourdieu 1984; Veblen 1994). A prominent example from the case study can be found in the way that WFM frames shopping at its stores as a way for consumers to “feel good” about where they shop. This slogan can be found throughout the store and in many of its promotional materials. On its face, the invitation to “feel good” about shopping at WFM seems to blend nicely consumer and citizenship ideals. We all have to shop for food, but here consumers are being offered a chance to do so in a way that generates personal satisfaction. I argue that this particular framing of the citizen-consumer hybrid – as a chance to feel morally correct through shopping – creates a contradiction in terms of class politics. A close examination of the moral implications of the citizen-consumer hybrid reveals that it creates a hierarchy of moral stratification that maps onto class stratification, thereby lending more weight to consumerism versus citizenship.

As the neo-liberal state retreats from responsibility for basic needs provisioning (and environmental regulation), corporations and the voluntary/NGO sector step in to fill social reproduction gaps. While state programs to provide marginalized populations with healthy, nutritious food are grossly under-developed,³⁴ market options for channeling healthy organic foods to middle and upper-middle income populations are increasingly well-established. This is especially so now that WFM has blazed a path for upscale grocery stores to follow (Matson 2005). The class implications of a bifurcated food system are not always explicit, particularly given the obstinate denial of class in WFM's framing of citizen-consumers. According to WFM, “whole food” is a matter of good taste, quality food, and health – not income. In an interview with *USA Today*, John Mackey was infuriated at the suggestion that Whole Foods is only a store for the wealthy, replying, “let's go down right now and count the Volvos in the parking lot” (Matson 2005). While Mackey vehemently insists that WFM shoppers are mainly educated people, he did concede that education “correlates with income, but not perfectly” (Matson 2005). Another interviewer pressed Mackey on the parallel rise of Whole Foods and WalMart, to which he responded, “the mass market is segmenting in food...Some people want the cheapest food, and some people want the highest quality food” (Maravillosa 2005).

Of course, the preference of “some people” for “quality” food is not randomly determined, but has well-documented sociological links to class and social status (Bourdieu 1984; Guthman 2003). The food at WFM is undeniably expensive.³⁵ A journalist comparing a basket of monthly food goods (based on the a minimal,

³⁴ The rise of organic superstores like WFM marks one end of the spectrum in neo-liberal food provisioning, the other extreme is marked by an increase in food banks. The institutionalization of food banks during the period of neo-liberal globalism demonstrates how the corporate sector is enmeshed with tasks of social reproduction, but in a way designed to maximize profitability. Relying on corporate donations to fill emergency food hampers, food banks provide a venue for the corporate food sector to dump damaged, past-due and trial products without having to pay tipping fees at landfills. The limitations of addressing poverty and chronic hunger through a system of charitably-distributed corporate waste have been well established (Poppendieck 1999), but viable alternatives for feeding food insecure populations are uncertain. While community food security programs do offer important ways of channeling healthy food to poor communities, these projects are often limited in scale (Johnston and Baker 2005).

³⁵ All of my research trips involve an expensive grocery bill; a research assistant working on the project reported feeling too poor to shop there while doing field work, yet feeling self-conscious and deprived being there without consuming.

USDA-recommended “low-cost food plan”) required to feed a small family calculated that the basket would cost \$232 plus sales tax at WalMart, and \$564 at Whole Foods Market (using only the lowest price foods in each category, and excluding the store’s popular luxury items; Cox 2006).

The class issues facing the citizen-consumer at WFM are not simply a matter of economic capital, and suggest the importance of access to cultural capital – the varying forms of cultural knowledge used to acquire and advance social standing – that, in the realm of food, includes knowledge about which foods will garner high status for those who consume them (typically naturalized as having “good taste”). As Bourdieu (1997) made clear, upper-class consumption patterns involve cultural capital in the production and reproduction of the “habitus” – the way culture (re)produces itself so that inequitable social relations appear natural and obvious. Significantly for a discussion of food, the habitus is not an idealist construct constituted in the realm of disembodied ideas, but is embedded in a subject’s dispositions and physical bodies. As such, WFM plays a role in the reproduction of the elite habitus by providing a place where consumers are offered the opportunity to “feel good about where they shop.” The dispositions and habitus of the social elite are inscribed at WFM as part of a “natural” disposition for high-quality, health-conscious, ethical food. WFM offerings represent a form of cultural capital that is not simply limited to those with economic capital, but corresponds with and naturalizes the status inequalities that accompany acute class divisions of neo-liberal states. As such, the citizen-consumer constructed in this retail space is encouraged to feel good about where they shop, but are not prompted to ask tough questions about those lacking the economic and cultural capital to access WFM’s broad choices of ethical foods.

Industry analysts may not use the language of cultural capital, but they fully recognize that the retail grocery business is segmented by social class along with race, ethnicity, education, neighborhood, and all the many factors correlated with divisions of income and wealth.³⁶ The emphasis on “quality” food at WFM legitimizes the inequalities of capitalist markets by validating elite food consumption as ethical, natural, and part of good “taste.”³⁷ In this way, the social reproduction of North American’s upper-middle class, people who can largely afford to buy some or all of their groceries at WFM, is validated as more “ethical” than the social reproduction of low income families who must count pennies and shop at discount food stores.³⁸ WFM team leader, Tanya Kleider, clearly articulates the idea that affluent WFM shoppers are more environmentally conscious and socially concerned

³⁶ Cox’s (2006) journalistic investigation into WFM found that there are no WFMs “located in zip codes with average 2003 household incomes at or below \$31,000 – the approximate income earned by a full-time employee earning the average Whole Foods wage,” and that “half of the zip codes with Whole Foods stores lie above \$72,000 in average income,” and one-quarter have incomes over \$100,000.

³⁷ The connection between class and ‘quality’ food is not unique to Whole Foods. See Guthman’s (2003) description of these connections in the case of California organics, and the connections made among gentrification, a high-wage economy, and class differentiation.

³⁸ While the entry of Walmart into organic foods partially addresses the class bifurcation of ‘quality’ food, it does not dissolve other markers of high-quality, high-status food available exclusively at WFM, such as foods marked as authentic, rare, and exotic (e.g., small-batch olive oils and rare imported cheese).

shoppers in her description of why WFM chose Oakville Ontario (an affluent town outside Toronto) to open its third Canadian store:

We've done a demographic study and believe Oakville will be a great site. The people of Oakville are sophisticated, educated and well traveled—and they know good food. Here, people care about food and the environment and what they put into their body and they're concerned about what their kids eat (Blokhuys 2004:C8).

The unstated assumption is that people who cannot afford to make these quality consumption choices are people who care less about these values – sophistication, education, travel, good food, children's health – and are, therefore, of lower status in the realm of food and social reproduction.

In summary, the concept of the “citizen-consumer” at WFM contains an implicit, but salient dimension of social class. The contradictory nature of the citizen-consumer at WFM is not simply about economic capital—the critique that the food at WFM is unduly expensive, and that not everybody can afford to exercise their “vote” by shopping there. The political-economic contradictions of WFM's participation in food markets and social reproduction is problematic for more subtle reasons. WFM's framing of the citizen-consumer legitimizes class boundaries by validating the food consumption habitus of elites as more ethical than those lacking cultural or economic capital to make similar food choices for themselves or their children.

Political ecology: Conservation through consumption

The WFM retail experience suggests that the citizen-consumer is serving goals of environmental protection and sustainability. According to the WFM (2000a) website, the company is a mission-driven organization that believes “in a virtuous circle entwining the food chain, human beings and Mother Earth: each is reliant upon the others through a beautiful and delicate symbiosis”. Environmental imagery adorns the store, filtering onto everything from paper napkins to shopping bags. Earth-tone color schemes, and unbleached paper napkins convey the impression of a more natural alternative to conventional supermarkets. While this imagery may be reassuring, it remains unclear to what extent a profit-maximizing corporation can ameliorate the environmental externalities associated with globalized, industrialized food production.³⁹ The case of WFM suggests a third, political-ecological contradiction facing the citizen-consumer, a contradiction that I term, “conservation through consumption.” The message presented through WFM's framing of the hybrid citizen-consumer is that certain forms of consumption can preserve and protect the environment while at the same time maintain a cornucopia of available products. The ecological contradictions of ethical consumption work similarly to the cultural and political-economic contradictions outlined above, strengthening the ideology of consumerism over the rights and responsibilities of citizens to restrict choice and self-interest in the goals of protecting the social and ecological commons.

³⁹ For an overview of the risks of industrial agriculture, see Kimbrell (2002); Laidlaw (2004); Magdoff et al. (2000).

This contradiction is manifested through a view of nature that maximizes commodity choice, while minimizing the citizen's ecological responsibilities to restrain consumption, reduce needs, and simply buy less.

As mentioned above, WFM's framing of an ethical consumer discourse emphasizes the overwhelming volume of consumer choice available to the citizen-consumer. This is not only problematic in terms of consumerism's emphasis on commodity choice (and minimization of responsibility), but it solidifies a cornucopian ideal of nature critiqued by food scholars and environmental theorists (Belasco 2002; Cosgrove 1982). Central to a modern ideology of consumerism, the cornucopian ideal is associated with an unsustainable ethic of resource consumption where resource limits are denied and obscured from view – the natural world is presented as infinitely generous and bountiful, and human ingenuity is presented as a panacea for environmental limitations (Belasco 2002). As mentioned, the variety of consumer choices available in WFM's large, well-appointed stores is astonishingly varied and seductive.⁴⁰ While WFM commodities are presented as more environmentally and socially benign than conventional products, the discourse and store layout are not designed to encourage restraint or contemplation of the industrial world's enormous ecological footprint. Instead, as with all consumer-oriented retail corporations, store layout and design is engineered to stimulate desire, enticing greater sales and *increased* consumption. The demand for food is notoriously inelastic (since people can only consume so much food), requiring that the WFM work all the harder to stimulate demand and reach the corporations' ambitious growth and sales targets. Yet market-research has established that increased variety, and even the perception of variety, works to increase consumption (Kahn and Wansink 2004; Rolls et al. 1981). At the same time consumption is encouraged, the ubiquitous environmental imagery, packaging, and signage at WFM suggest that resource conservation can significantly occur through consumption.

By framing political-ecological solutions through a “conservation through consumption” strategy, the choices required of ecological citizenship are minimized for the citizen-consumer. In particular, the WFM framing process does little to emphasize the choice to consume less imported, long-distance, energy-intensive packaged foods, and to consume more local, unprocessed food products—an important choice since long-distance, processed foods are strongly connected to unsustainable cereal monocultures and the production of greenhouse gases (Shrybman 2000; Clay 2004; Manning 2004). At WFM, choosing local foods is presented as an option, but it is one option among many commodity choices. Consider the example of cheese. WFM boasts of providing “hundreds of varieties of cheeses – imported, local, hard, soft, cow, goat, sheep, even cheese made from Yak milk – are beautifully displayed, all ready to sample upon request” (WFM 2005b). WFM recognizes the importance of carrying local cheeses (particularly after the public critiques by figures like Michael Pollan), but with cheese available from around the world, the ecological imperative to consume locally produced cheese is diminished. The seductiveness of

⁴⁰ As *Slate* columnist, Maloney (2006) observed, “every media profile of [WFM] invariably contains a paragraph of fawning produce porn, near-sonnets about “gleaming melons” and “glistening kumquats.”

WFM's ample array of globally-sourced food choices, packaged and presented as part of nature's cornucopian culinary bounty, works to validate ethically the ideology of consumerism, despite its shaky ecological underpinnings.

By framing the ideal of consumer variety as immensely pleasurable, the citizen-based imperative to restrict food choices to locally-produced goods becomes a tougher sell. Small-scale food alternatives like food coops and community supported agriculture face an uphill battle in expanding the scale of their programs to the cultural mainstream, convincing a larger mass of food consumers to restrict choice in the name of ecological sustainability. Why should consumers voluntarily limit their food choices, when globally-sourced foods and local delicacies are so deliciously optimized in the well-stocked and beautifully displayed aisles of WFM?

The political-ecological contradiction evident within the framing process at WFM suggests that the hybrid citizen-consumer concept is overshadowed by the ideology of consumerism. An ethical consumer experience that was substantively organized around citizenship rights and responsibilities, with a vision of geographically proximate, unprocessed, fair-trade food, would undoubtedly suffer from lower sales, particularly since a key message of ecological citizenship is the need for affluent consumers to consume *less* (Durning 1992). A corporation that is legally entitled to maximize shareholder returns (Bakan 2004) is unlikely to orient an ethical consumer experience around the obligations of citizenship. To be clear, this is not to say that a citizen-based food politics is impossible or undesirable (see Hassanein 2003; Halweil 2005), but that the de-centering of consumer ideology is less likely to occur in a vertically-oriented corporation committed to profit maximization and global expansion, and reliant on maximizing consumer choices in a mega-store shopping format.⁴¹

WFM's framing of "conservation through consumption" also draws the citizen-consumer towards the commodification of nature – a process critiqued for perpetuating a social construction of nature that is superficial, anthropocentric, and unsustainable (Beardsley 2000; Price 1999; Davis 1997). WFM products are consistently presented as "natural" and "kind" to the environment, regardless of whether they are locally sourced or produced according to organic processes. Images of "nature" and natural imagery, and references to the "natural" are used extensively throughout the store, decorating WFM's printed and electronic literature, the WFM logo, the in-house WFM store labels, and filling the pages of its pamphlets and electronic newsletters: "Everyday value hardwood charcoal" is made from the "greenest" process possible and sourced from "100% natural hardwood"; a recipe section routinely contains the headline, "make it natural" (WFM 2005a).

The language of "nature" and ecological sustainability in WFM discourse could potentially work to de-fetishize food commodities' ecological underpinnings, heightening consumer awareness of the need for responsible action on a range of

⁴¹ A food coop or a non-profit food service is more amenable to delivering a message of consumption reduction (that de-centers consumer identities in favor of citizen responsibilities), since it is not legally bound to maximize sales. See, for instance, Johnston and Baker (2005) for a description of a non-profit service of this nature, and for a discussion of the limited scale of these projects given the dominant culture ideology of consumerism.

environmental issues associated with food production. However, the solutions offered at WFM are centered around individual shopping habits, and represent a modest response to widespread ecological crises such as oceanic depletion, global warming, and the over-use of nitrogen-based fertilizers. The solutions presented are “easy,” and consumer-friendly ways to increase sales of WFM products, and capitalize on concern for the environment without fully addressing the crisis of industrial agriculture or the un-sustainability of North American foodways. The WFM e-newsletter, “Fl@vours,” for example, boasts of its “fresh tilapia,” an ocean fish raised in a farm and imported from Costa Rica and available to WFM shoppers in the Toronto location. According to the newsletter, the fresh tilapia now available is raised “[u]sing the pure, sparkling waters of the Costa Rican rain forest,” and comes from “a *fully-natural* hatchery known for its social responsibility and excellent quality control”; a recipe for “Grilled Tilapia Piccata en Papillote” is also included (WFM 2005a; emphasis mine). By connoting images of a “pure” Costa Rican rain forest, and using the term “fully natural,” the environmental and culinary allure of this consumption choice is augmented, while the problematic aspects of the product are left unspecified. For North Americans to consume a piece of fish grown thousands of miles away, and then flown in “fresh” (using countless gallons of jet fuel), is environmentally suspect and duplicitous, particularly given the explicit presentation of fresh tilapia as a “sustainable choice” (WFM 2005a). Yet in keeping with the logic of consumerism, WFM must always offer more choices to food consumers, and is unable or unwilling to substantially limit food choices in the service of larger citizen-based ecological objectives – such as limiting menus to geographically proximate foods that are minimally processed, and reducing food miles in the service of reducing greenhouse gas emissions.⁴²

Discussion

I have argued that WFM’s framing of the citizen-consumer hybrid generates multiple contradictions as it relates to three dimensions of social reproduction in globalized economies: a cultural-ideology of consumerism, a political-economic denial of class inequality, and a political-ecological message of conservation through consumption. My objective has not been to provide an exhaustive assessment of all dimensions of

⁴² WFM’s discursive commodification of nature through food products is vulnerable to critiques made of commodified nature in other corporate consumption realms. Beardsley (2000) argues that the commodification of nature is not only happening at large-scale theme parks and exhibits (e.g., SeaWorld, Disney’s Animal Kingdom), but is occurring in ordinary places like malls and grocery stores, where nature is constructed as “a source of products that makes you feel good rather than as a primary and complex phenomenon for which one bears personal and social responsibility” (p. 3). In a critique of the commodification of nature through corporate chains like the Rainforest Café, Beardsley (2000) describes how the corporate message of salvation and conservation through consumption is both illogical and “possibly deceptive,” particularly since it might “comfort some into thinking that consumption and waste aren’t among our most pressing social and environmental challenges” (p. 4). Kate Sandilands (1993, 1997) similarly critiques green consumerism, arguing that the very idea is an oxymoron that depoliticizes environmental problems, shifts accountability from government and corporations towards individual lifestyle choices, and leaves the daily lives of consumers relatively unchallenged.

WFM – a complex and ever expanding corporation – but to use the case to understand more fully how the citizen-consumer hybrid is framed by a corporate actor, and to investigate what ideological tensions between consumerism and citizenship are present in the framing. Rather than meet the requirements of consumerism and citizenship equally, I found that the citizen-consumer hybrid provides relatively superficial attention to citizenship goals in order better to serve three key elements of consumerist ideology: consumer choice, status distinction, and ecological cornucopianism.

The WFM case cannot stand-in for all ethically-oriented corporations, but it can be used to “extend out,” speaking to the possibilities and limitations of the hybrid citizen-consumer concept more generally. The emergence of the citizen-consumer cannot simply be understood as individual acts of benevolence – either by individual shoppers at WFM or corporate CEOs like John Mackey – but as a reaction to the social inequality and ecological deterioration of neoliberal capitalism, and its associated veneration of market-based solutions. Ethically oriented corporations, like WFM, seek to distance themselves from the anti-corporate sentiment articulated by global justice movements, and expressed in market failures and corporate corruption scandals. The corporate market-place increasingly appears to provide citizen-consumers solace from the social perils and ecological risks of capitalist globalization processes. As such, the rise of ethical corporations and ethical consumption opportunities represents the privatization of social and ecological concerns, as the neo-liberal state distances itself from responsibility to ensure equitable and ecologically sustainable means of social reproduction. This suggests that the citizen-consumer framing identified in the case of WFM is not an isolated phenomenon, but is related to a larger structural and ideological tension between global capitalism’s relentless treadmill of production (facilitated by the ideology of consumerism; Schnaiberg et al. 2002), and increasing public awareness of the social and ecological consequences of high-consumption lifestyles (as articulated by citizen struggles to resuscitate the commons).

WFM’s framing of the citizen-consumer in ethical consumer discourse can also be related to a larger discursive realm – the meta-discourse⁴³ of liberal capitalist productivism, which has increasingly been brought into question as its dystopian elements – climate change, species extinction, inequality, and poverty – become harder to ignore (Smith 1998:5). The meta-discourse of capitalist productivism has undergone serious challenges in the globalization period, forcing a reevaluation its expansionist logic. However, Smith’s (1998) writing on environmental marketing strategies suggests that the rupture can also be “temporarily ‘sutured,’ that is, conceptually sewn back together” (p. 6). Green consumerism has functioned as one such “suture,” meaning “an attempt to hide the wound that contemporary environmentalists are making to the smooth fabric of productivist discourse” (Smith 1998:7). The discourse of sustainable development functions in a similar fashion,

⁴³ The idea of a modern “meta-discourse” is used to distinguish an overarching spirit of modernity (Lyotard 1984). Similar notions have been used by other academic traditions to describe an overarching, and unquestioned logic justifying economic expansionism. The French regulation school, for example, speaks of a *mode of capital regulation*, understood as a “body of interiorized rules and social processes,” which takes the form of “norms, habits, laws, regulating networks” (Lipietz 1986).

closing the gap between the ecological exhaustion witnessed globally, and a utopian faith in the benefits of industrialization and perpetual growth spread globally (Johnston 2003).

The corporate framing of the citizen-consumer hybrid appears to form a similar role to that of green marketing and sustainable development. Through WFM's framing of ethical consumption, citizen-consumers are seemingly able to reconcile increased public skepticism about the social and ecological costs of global capitalism, and the need for corporate profit expansion via high consumption levels. The citizen-consumer can express the social and environmental concerns that impact them as citizens, while sustaining a commitment to a consumer ideology based on perpetual economic growth and sovereign consumer choice with few limitations.⁴⁴

Can the competing demands of citizenship and consumerism be easily reconciled? I have argued that this articulation of the citizen-consumer, at least in the case of WFM, engenders profound contradictions that severely limit its transformative potential. However, it is important to emphasize that discourses are never homogenous. Possibilities for a more balanced citizenship-focused hybrid may be found in different modes of food provisioning, particularly when they are framed by non-profit organizations more able to de-center the idea of consumer choice in the service of ideals like social justice, solidarity, and sustainability (e.g., community supported agriculture, slow-food movements, community food security projects). These are cases where the principles of citizenship are more substantively incorporated, echoing Hilton's (2003) suggestion that consumerism "has offered the most potential not when it has confined itself to obtaining value for money at the point of sale, but when it has sought an active relationship with the wider concerns of citizenship" (p. 339). In the case of WFM, however, the presence of profound cultural, political-economic, and political-ecological contradictions suggests a limited articulation of citizenship principles, and limited counter-hegemonic outcomes when ethical consumption is framed by an expansive, vertically-organized transnational corporation. Contradictions stem from what WFM includes in its framing of the citizen-consumer hybrid, but also from what is excluded. In particular, the WFM's framing of the hybrid obscures many of the responsibilities of citizenship, and the associated tools of democratic accountability, public regulation, and strong states to ensure that the commons are effectively regulated, sustained, and equitably accessed over long time-frames. These omissions could be interpreted as personal failings of WFM shoppers or its libertarian CEO, John Mackey, but I would argue that casting blame in these directions misses the point, and obscures a broader failure—the failure of a neo-liberal mode of social reproduction that idealizes markets and consumers as primary guardians of the public good, and occludes the importance of non-market measures and democratically-accountable states to provide for needs of citizens and channel citizen efforts to protect and preserve the commons.

⁴⁴ The would-be citizen-consumer at WFM thus operates within the broader rubric of ecological modernization, channeling the desire for more sustainable choices into the market-place, thereby enabling some degree of environmental protection without challenging economic growth. Thanks to a reviewer at *Theory and Society* for suggesting this point to me.

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