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**ADDING HUMAN RIGHTS TO THE  
SHOPPING LIST: BRITISH WOMEN'S  
ABOLITIONIST BOYCOTTS AS  
RADICAL LEARNING AND PRACTICE**

**AGREGAR LOS DERECHOS HUMANOS A LA LISTA DE LA  
COMPRA: BOICOTS ABOLICIONISTAS DE MUJERES  
BRITÁNICAS COMO APRENDIZAJE Y PRÁCTICA RADICALES**

**Resumen**

*Desde mi trabajo a partir de una perspectiva de estudios culturales feminista/crítica, que percibe la cultura y la sociedad como imbuida con tensiones políticas, planteo dos preguntas centrales en este artículo. En primer lugar, cómo puede entenderse el activismo del consumidor, basado en la comunidad, como una estrategia adoptada por grupos marginados para hacer valer la reivindicación de sus derechos. Me centro en boicots abolitionistas de mujeres británicas de los siglos XVIII y XIX como un estudio de caso de esta interpretación. Estas campañas se aprovecharon de los papeles de las mujeres definidos socialmente como compradoras y consumistas para movilizar y hacer pública la oposición a la esclavitud y para hacer campaña por los derechos políticos de las mujeres. En segundo lugar, cuáles son las consecuencias de este caso para la educación de personas adultas. El aprendizaje de este estudio de caso es multifacético. Estudia la historia de los conceptos de ciudadanía, derechos humanos y consumismo para que, hoy en día, podamos entenderlos como discursos que han sido desarrollados*

*Convergence, Volume XLI, Number 1, 2008*

para dar cabida a intereses cambiantes, presiones y tensiones en la sociedad civil. Este caso también echa luz sobre las complicaciones de la resistencia y el poderoso 'aprendizaje incidental' político (Foley 1999, 2001) que se desarrolla en el curso del compromiso cívico, pero que a menudo se pasa por alto precisamente porque no puede preverse y se inserta en la acción.

## **AJOUTER DES DROITS DE L'HOMME À LA LISTE D'ACHATS: BOYCOTTS DE L'ABOLITIONNISTE DES FEMMES BRITANNIQUES EN TANT QUE L'ÉTUDE ET PRATIQUE EN MATIÈRE DE RADICAL**

### **Résumé**

*Travaillant de perspective des études culturelles féministes/critiques qui perçoit la culture et la société comme imprégnée de tensions politiques, je pose deux questions centrales dans cet article. D'abord, comment peut-on comprendre l'activisme du consommateur à caractère communautaire comme stratégie adoptée par les groupes marginalisés pour affirmer des réclamations de droites? Je me concentre sur les boycotts abolitionnistes des femmes britanniques du dix-huitième siècle et du dix-neuvième siècle comme étude de cas de cette compréhension. Ces campagnes ont exploité les rôles des femmes socialement définis comme clients et consommateurs pour mobiliser et attirer l'attention sur l'opposition publique à l'esclavage, et faire campagne de plus pour les droits politiques des femmes. Deuxièmement, quelles sont les implications de cet exemple pour l'éducation des adultes? L'érudition de cette étude de cas est à multiples facettes. Il rend historique les concepts de la citoyenneté, des droits de l'homme et du consumérisme de sorte que, aujourd'hui, nous puissions les comprendre comme discours qui se sont développés pour adapter à des intérêts, à des pressions et à des tensions changeants dans la société civile. Ce cas illumine également les complications de la résistance, et 'l'apprentissage accessoire' politiquement puissant (Foley 1999, 2001) qui se développe au cours de la participation civique, mais qui est souvent ignoré exactement parce qu'il est imprévu et est enfoncé dans l'action.*

### **Abstract**

*Working from a feminist/critical cultural studies perspective, which perceives culture and society as imbued with political tensions, I pose two central questions in this article. First, how can community-based, consumer activism be understood as a strategy adopted by marginalised groups to assert rights claims? I focus on British women's eighteenth- and nineteenth-century abolitionist boycotts as a case study of this understanding. These campaigns drew on women's socially defined roles as shoppers and consumers both to mobilise and publicise opposition to slavery, and to agitate further for women's political rights. Second, what are the implications of this case for adult education? The learning from this case study is multifaceted. It historicises the concepts of citizenship, human rights and consumerism so that, today, we can*

**Convergence**, Volume XLI, Number 1, 2008

*understand them as discourses that have developed to accommodate changing interests, pressures and tensions in civil society. This case also illuminates the complications of resistance, and the powerful political 'incidental learning' (Foley 1999, 2001) which develops in the course of civic engagement, but is often overlooked precisely because it is unanticipated and embedded in action.*

## **Introduction**

In this article, I relate consumption to citizenship, human rights and adult education by addressing two central questions. First, I ask how consumer activism can be understood as a strategy adopted by marginalised groups to assert their rights claims. Second, I explore the implications of such consumer-based activism for adult education. I use British women's boycotts of slave-produced sugar during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a case study to explore these questions and discuss its complex lessons. As I will establish, this case offers a rich example of the contributions that women and other marginalised groups make to social and political development. Furthermore, this case sheds light on what Griff Foley (1999, 2001) refers to as 'incidental learning' which develops in the course of civic engagement, but is often overlooked precisely because it is unanticipated and embedded in the action of everyday life. This case study historicizes contemporary struggles over consumption, citizenship and human rights, connecting them to struggles over the same issues in different times and places. Moreover, it deepens contemporary learning about learning.

In addressing my central questions, I adopt a feminist/critical cultural studies perspective, which perceives culture and society as imbued with political tensions. I begin by defining the concepts used in my analysis. Next, I lay out the context for this discussion by outlining mainstream rhetoric of citizenship, human rights and consumption. I then describe the case of British women's abolitionist campaigns in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and explain how these campaigns presaged mainstream discourses about citizenship, human rights, and consumption. Finally, I discuss the learning from this case study and its implications for adult education.

## **A Feminist/Critical Cultural Studies Analytical Framework**

As I have explained, I understand civil society and its cultural practices as inherently contested ground. Shopping and consumption are examples of cultural practices that are guided by material reality and ideologically driven discourses. How much money one has access to combines with an ideology of consumerism to influence one's shopping and consumption choices and decisions.

Recognising the tension between material circumstances and cultural influences, I draw on Antonio Gramsci's (1971) thoughts on 'hegemony', 'ideology' and 'common sense'. For Gramsci, ideologies are those 'system[s] of ideas' (Gramsci 1971, 376) that "'organise" human masses, and create the terrain on which men [sic] move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.' (377). These dominant or 'hegemonic' ideologies, such as consumerism or neoliberalism, are associated with taken-for-granted assumptions that Gramsci calls 'common sense'. Examples of today's common sense include the insistence that individuals are responsible for their life outcomes and the equation of democratic choice with consumer choice.

The importance of hegemonic ideologies and common sense lies in their ability to appeal to divergent groups of citizens. Hegemonic ideologies promise, often falsely, to extend social inclusion and opportunities to marginalised groups. Most importantly, these ideologies indicate how, in democracies, those in positions of power yield to citizens' demands, but only to the extent necessary to garner sufficient acceptance of existing social relations. Hegemony is fluid, shifting in response to emerging pressures even as it maintains the status quo. It is the constant tension between citizens' agitation and compliance, governments' use of force and consent, and material relations and culture that interested Gramsci and is exposed in my exploration of the complications of everyday shopping and consumption.

Critics of Gramsci's work claim he lived in a time when the industrialised nation-state was the dominant frame of reference in Western thinking. In their view, 'we must go beyond Gramsci if we are to gain an adequate understanding of how social life is organised in the final years of the twentieth century' (Germain and Kenny 1998, 19). Other scholars continue to find Gramsci's ideas useful, arguing that 'the general point that Gramsci has to be related to his historical context should not mean that his concepts are a simple expression of these conditions' (Morton 1999, 2). In Stuart Hall's (1991, 114) words, 'I do not claim that, in any simple way, Gramsci "has the answers" or "holds the key" to our present troubles. I do believe that we must "think" our problems in a Gramscian way – which is different'.

The work of feminist scholars Nancy Fraser (1992) and Holloway Sparks (1997) complements Gramsci's (1971) ideas and brings them into a contemporary social and scholarly context. Fraser's concept of 'subaltern counterpublics' refers to the 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (Fraser 1992, 123). Manifestations of social divisions, subaltern counterpublics enable collective challenges to hegemonic ideologies, common sense and structures, and development of counter-hegemonic ideologies which better reflect and serve the interests of marginalised groups.

Sparks (1997) inserts the idea of dissidence into her discussion of subaltern counterpublics. As she explains, 'dissident citizenship...encompasses the often creative oppositional practices of citizens who, either by choice or (much more commonly) by forced exclusion from the institutionalised means of opposition, contest current arrangements of power from the margins of the polity' (Sparks 1997, 75). For Sparks, American civil rights icon Rosa Parks represents the complexity of dissidence. Parks 'epitomised quiet, middle-class respectability. She was demure, feminine, heterosexual, married, family-oriented, hard-working, and churchgoing...Arguably, this respectability and traditionality made Parks a relatively "safe" means of contesting white male power in Montgomery' (Sparks 1997, 99). As a dissident figure, Parks affirmed pieces of the hegemonic discourse of citizenship—including those of gender and class—at the same time as she renounced another piece—that of race. Moving from national citizenship to transnational human rights, Balakrishnan Rajagopal (2003, 10) reaches a similar conclusion about the paradox of resistance: '...I note the somewhat tragic reality that resistance must work, to some extent, within the parameters established by that which is being resisted'. A main paradox of the struggle for citizenship and human rights is that, even in moments of dissidence among subaltern counterpublics, existing hegemony is both opposed and accepted.

Another paradox that I will make apparent is that social struggles involve learning and that, in those struggles, much of the most crucial learning goes unrecognised. The case of British women's abolitionist work informs more than an understanding of the links between citizenship, human rights and consumption; it also informs the conceptualisation of adult learning. On that matter, I take up Griff Foley's (1999, 2001) notion of 'incidental learning'. Incidental learning is developed through what Foley discusses as collective action, or what Sparks (1997) and Fraser (1992) discuss as the dissidence of subaltern counterpublics. As Foley clarifies, much of the learning that accompanies collective social action is not purposeful or planned. Part of that accidental, 'incidental' learning is a more profound understanding of social relations and how politics operate throughout civil society. Another part is the development of skills and relationships that can help dissidents resist hegemonic structures and systems, and develop alternative ideologies, discourses and practices. In the context of the case study explored here, British women engaged in the abolitionist movement are exemplars of subaltern counterpublics. Although consumerism is frequently presented as a hegemonic ideology, these women used consumerism and consumption in the service of dissidence. Their abolitionist campaigns illustrate how citizenship, human rights and consumption have long been connected in both hegemonic and dissident discourses, and how learning is a complex of planned and unplanned, solitary and collective processes.

## Citizenship, Human Rights and Consumption: Discursive Links

A hegemonic discourse of human rights developed in the twentieth century, based largely in the United Nations' (UN) work. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN's General Assembly in 1948, is the standard of this discourse. Article 1 of that document articulates the underlying ideologically based common sense: 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience' (United Nations 1948).

The UN has addressed human rights in what has been described as three 'generations' (Tomuschat 2004). Discourse has developed from a focus on "negative" human rights, or civil liberties' to a greater consideration of 'economic or social rights such as the right to work or the right to social security' to 'highly complex composite rights like the right to development, the right to peace and the right to a clean environment' (Tomuschat 2004, 24). Tomuschat (2004, 25) further qualifies that the word 'generation' does not imply that types of rights replace one another sequentially; rather, different types of rights exist in 'a relationship of coexistence and mutual support'.

This so-called generational understanding of human rights is similar to the mainstream understanding of democratic citizenship that lays out three types of rights: civil, political and social (Marshall 1992). These rights have been emphasised in different ways in the history of modern democratic citizenship. Feminist scholar Ruth Lister (2003) points out that, although the developing rights discourse invoked the notion of equality, it did not eliminate social divisions. Today, it is clear that citizenship is an 'essentially contested concept' (Lister 2003, 14), characterised by the struggles of social groups attempting to mitigate their marginalisation by articulating rights claims. Lister (2003, 91, emphasis in original) proposes a paradigm which responds to these struggles by moving beyond a dichotomisation of difference and equality, through 'a *differentiated universalism* in which the achievement of the universal is contingent upon attention to difference'. Human rights are contested similarly at the international level. The development of forums for marginalised voices, including women, racialised and indigenous peoples, and citizens of what is commonly referred to as the 'Global South', reflect the extent to which '[t]he space between the promise of international law and its achievement is not a vacuum or a silence, but is increasingly filled by voices of discontent, and by friction causing heat that may melt the iron will of resistance and rise to incendiary proportions' (Cook 2001, 69).

Today, there are both commonalities and differences between discourses of citizenship and human rights. Overlap is perhaps best indicated by rhetoric of global citizenship, which builds on and broadens the scope of issues previously

conceptualised within the borders of the nation-state. One of the central divergences between the two mainstream discourses is that, while human rights remains focused on a liberal, legalistic framework through a distinctly political process, democratic citizenship is increasingly fused with capitalism and conveyed as rights to and processes of consumption which are depoliticised by a so-called free market (Herrmann 2002; Zukin and Maguire 2004).

Introduced in seventeenth-century Britain, waged labour and 'the peaceful, systematic, national generation of profits through the sale of commodities produced for a free market' (Bocock 1993, 11) marked an early form of capitalist economic structure. Middle and working classes developed, creating new groups of consumers. A consumerist ideology gave members of these new classes a sense that, through their consumption, they could emulate the elite class (Midgley 1992).<sup>1</sup> As capitalism developed alongside democracy, issues of consumer and political rights became increasingly conflated (Herrmann 2002). In today's postmodern world, consumption is understood as a primary process of flexible identity-construction (Bocock 1993; Herrmann 2002; Zukin and Maguire 2004). Material relations have by no means vanished as a concern; however, critical cultural studies scholars increasingly recognise the tension that exists between consumption as a material process and consumption as a symbolic process. As I proceed with my analysis in the following section, I clarify that consumerism and consumption have exerted a historical influence on struggles over both citizenship and human rights, and that the tension manifest in consumption between material relations and cultural processes has been evident for centuries.

## Women, Shopping and Abolitionism

I turn now to case study at the centre of my analysis, the British women who participated in organised boycotts of slave-produced sugar during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This case serves as an example of how pressures in civil society can have broad political influence, and why ideologically based discourses and practices, such as consumerism, consumption, citizenship and human rights, can be better understood in their contemporary forms if they are historicised. In my exploration, I draw largely on the extensive gender analyses of Clare Midgley (1992) and Charlotte Sussman (2000). This case study helps counter-balance today's hegemonic discourses of citizenship and human rights, which are driven by an ideologically neoliberal understanding of equality, rights, the consumer and the citizen. It also helps balance existing scholarship on abolitionism and capitalism which tends to focus on production, trade and formal politics, downplaying women's social roles and contributions as secondary to men's (Midgley 1992; Zukin and Maguire 2004). Although women's pivotal role in consumption has been acknowledged (Bocock 1993; Hilton 2003; Zukin and

Maguire 2004), this case is an early, clear example of the links between gender, race, citizenship, human rights and consumerism, and of how consumerism has been employed to counter as well as to bolster hegemony.

British abolitionism emerged in the context of increasingly entrenched industrial capitalism and a consumerist ideology. Industrial capitalism made waged work the norm and created a new consuming middle class (Bocock 1993). As working-class (white) men sought jobs and wealthy or middle-class (white) men acted on entrepreneurial opportunities, there were new calls for free trade and open markets, rather than markets subsidised by slave labour (Midgley 1992; Sussman 2000). Gender structures were strengthened as men were positioned in the so-called public sphere of work, trade and politics, and women in the private sphere of home and family care. 'Housewifization' (Mies 1986) created the expectation that middle- and upper-class women would support not just their families but also the empire by buying and consuming goods produced in the colonies. An important commodity produced by slave labour, sugar shifted from luxury to staple with the help of 'broad cultural changes in the use of time, women's roles, and the opportunity to use sugar in new social rituals – at teatime, for example, and during a separate course at meals called dessert' (Zukin and Maguire 2004, 178).

I concur with Midgley's (1992) and Sussman's (2000) conclusion that women's boycotts of slave-produced sugar illustrate how gender and class, along with race and nationality, 'interlocked' to simultaneously raise and suppress 'uncomfortable questions concerning the exploitation of women as well as the exploitation of labourers' (Midgley 1992). These campaigns engaged diverse groups of women, whose commitment to abolitionism bridged religious, class, ethno-racial and even national differences. Their collective efforts challenged hegemonic ideologies and practices which constructed race, gender, class and nationality in ways that legitimated both the enslavement of blacks and the exclusion of women from full citizenship rights (Klotz 2002; Midgley 1992; Sussman 2000).

Britain was heavily involved in the enslavement of Africans, especially when the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 provided a 30-year monopoly on the African slave trade. In the Caribbean colonies, slaves laboured on plantations, often growing cotton and sugar cane. Colonial production bolstered Britain's imperial and economic power, facilitated the development of mercantile capitalism, and prompted the creation of new domestic markets (Klotz 2002; Midgley 1992; Mies 1986; Sussman 2000). Slavery was accompanied by a consumerist ideology, which held out a promise – albeit frequently empty – to the new British working and middle classes that they could not only ensure their security and comfort, but also build their social status in national societies through emulation of the elite (Midgley 1992).



According to Midgley (1992, 5), 'for a long time, this profitable practice caused British subjects very few moral qualms, but by the 1780s, Britons began to grow dissatisfied with the economic and moral structures that governed the West Indian Trade, and the first wave of agitation to abolish the slave trade and emancipate Britain's slaves began to swell'. By the late eighteenth century, there were an estimated 300,000 British 'abstainers' or boycotters of slave-produced sugar (Sussman 2000, 38). By 1790, slavery in England itself was discontinued and slaves there were emancipated; however, the use of slave labour continued in British colonies. Although British women, from poor freed slaves to wealthy white Christians with social and political ties, were active in the abolitionist movement from its beginning, attempts to estimate their number are undermined by the reality that British women had no formal political or social rights at that time. Unable to vote, sign petitions, join advocacy organisations or legally own the products that they purchased on behalf of their husbands, they did not count and could not be counted easily.

Still, there is a great deal that is known about abolitionist abstainers in Britain. They were largely 'from the metropolitan middle classes; associated with industrialisation – as workers, owners, or beneficiaries of urban culture' (Sussman 2000, 113). Many abolitionists, both men and women, supported free trade and open work opportunities, which they viewed as essential to their own economic success. One of the central reasons for the opposition to slavery, then, was the concern that it subsidised labour and production costs and diminished abolitionists' chances in an increasingly competitive market for goods and labour.

Never a single, unified group, British abolitionists were mobilised by diverse interests and concerns, far beyond support for free trade and work. Members of Christian sects that promoted both racial and gender equality, including Quakers, Unitarians and Methodists, joined more conservative evangelical Anglicans in countering slavery as cruel and unjust. Other British citizens were drawn to abolitionism not out of humanitarian or ethical convictions or out of business interests, but out of ethnic and nationalist sentiments. Sussman (2000), for example, describes the argument that foods produced in the colonies were foreign and detrimental to the British diet and culture. She also cites the metaphor of cannibalism which was invoked by some abolitionists who argued that consumption of slave-produced sugar amounted to consumption of slaves, whose labour was extracted at a price of their own well-being and, eventually, their very lives. Even the supporters of free trade had diverse reasons for adopting an abolitionist stance. For some, abolitionist boycotts were never more than a reflection of their own business interests. For others, self-interest combined with Protestant teachings, which stressed 'ideals of self-realisation' (Sussman 2000, 35), self-restraint and charity.

Although contemporary globalisation is often seen as unique, late eighteenth-century imperialism created its own globalising effect. Imperial conquests moved both people and products throughout colonies and into other countries. Enslaved peoples were forced into global migration, but for other groups colonial imperialism made possible new ways of conforming to and opposing social structures. On the one hand, traders travelled to find new products and sell them in domestic markets. On the other hand, the abolitionist movement created a transnational response to this iteration of globalisation. For example, leaders in abolitionist Christian churches travelled between Britain and the United States to plan their strategies and build support. For several decades, abolitionism brought people together despite their divergent motivations and messages.

British women in the abolitionist movement reflected this diversity of interests, but had a distinct role that both reflected and challenged their social constraints and responsibilities. In eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain, women lacked formal political rights. They were not entitled to vote or participate in parliamentary affairs, and were generally forbidden from signing petitions.<sup>2</sup> Because they were excluded from formal political processes, British women had no choice but to enact their dissidence through subaltern counterpublics. They did this by forming ladies' societies where they could give and hear speeches and develop protest tactics, circulating pamphlets and visiting neighbours, writing and reading literature written for women, lending support to men's abolitionist organisations, and abstaining from purchasing and using slave-produced products such as sugar.<sup>3</sup>

Like all movements, abolitionism had a political aim; so, it seems ironic that women's involvement in it was sought even though they did not have political power or rights. In a telling statement about the importance of civil society in initiating political shifts and the potential for subaltern counterpublics to generate a form of power, Midgley (1992) suggests that women and consumption were purposefully included in abolitionist strategies because the tactic of petitioning initially taken up by men was unsuccessful. This lack of success was related to Britain's witnessing of the French Revolution. In an attempt to quell a similar revolution, Britain's Parliament banned activities such as petitioning in the 1790s, forcing a strategic change for the abolitionists (Midgley 1992; Sussman 2000). Around the same time, the slave revolt in Haiti eliminated France's source of sugar and created a new market for Britain's slave-produced sugar. Together, these international events suspended the effectiveness of abolitionist campaigns until early in the nineteenth century.

As it became clear that formal political strategies were not working, new strategies were sought. Abstention campaigns solicited the support of women through the moral and nationalist invocations used with men, as well as through appeals to the 'feminine' ideals of sentimentality and compassion (Midgley

1992; Sussman 2000). As Klotz (2002, 59) states, 'the active role of women in politics, in an era before they gained suffrage, not only marked a critical precedent in the evolution of women's rights but also directly affected the tactics used'. Here, Klotz implies that at least some women related the enslavement of blacks to the exclusion of women from citizenship rights and status (see also Midgley 1992; Sussman 2000). These women, including writer Mary Wollstonecraft, extended their abolitionist work to lobby for their own political rights, constructing an early iteration of feminism.

At the same time as the boycott campaign found ways to include politically marginalised women in an essentially political action, it continued to exclude some women on the basis of class. Working class and poor women could not afford the more expensive but freely produced sugar from India; therefore, abolitionist boycotts remained a largely middle-class tactic (Klotz 2002; Midgley 1992; Sussman 2000). In this way, British women abolitionists illustrate the complications of dissidence and resistance. Despite differences in their outlooks and aims, women exercised 'creative oppositional practices' (Sparks 1997, 75), even as they reinforced hegemonic gender, class, and ethno-racial norms. The following excerpt from Sussman's (2000) book captures the complexities of the abolitionists and their boycotts:

By reimagining consumption as a fundamental right, rather than as an obligation, and by transforming international interdependence into individual choice...they helped create a new form of political agency – consumer power...Furthermore, by proclaiming the moral or ethical nature of such choices, anti-consumption campaigns extended a form of political power to some individuals who were otherwise denied such agency...There is a way, then, in which these practices extended political agency to those outside the political franchise, such as women, colonial subjects, and religious dissenters. Such agency, however, was predicated on the luxury of choice, a negative correlative of bourgeois privilege, which was probably unavailable to the labouring poor. This form of political action was also associated with a certain form of capitalist ideology – one that celebrated the individual's power over the complex dynamics of international markets (Sussman 2000, 43 and 44).

## Learning Politics, Politicising Learning

The learning that emerges from this case study is multifaceted. There was learning evident for the British women who participated in abolitionist boycotts centuries ago, and there are lessons for consumer-citizens concerned about today's politics of consumption, citizenship and human rights. This case study

also offers insights into adult learning, stretching the conventional conceptualisation of lifelong learning so that it encompasses even the most informal learning.

### **Incidental Learning of Women Abolitionist Boycotters**

Consistent with Foley's (1999, 2001) ideas about incidental learning, this case illustrates a form of unintended political learning that emerges during civic engagement. Women who participated in boycotts of slave-produced sugar learned that, sometimes, shopping is a process of not-buying. In that way, they subverted consumerism's attachment to democracy by extending the notion of consumer choice to the possibility of non-consumption. Acting collectively, British women engaged in abolitionism illustrated a further social and cultural complexity of shopping. Trumpeting a kind of liberalism, consumerism portrays shopping and consumption as solitary and private activities; however, as women's collective, consumption-based actions more accurately convey, these processes – like learning itself – are a meeting ground of the private and the public, the solitary and the social. Finally, many women came to deepen their understanding of their own marginalisation through their abolitionist work. They learned how to mobilise, publicise and protest. Through these tactics, they developed skills that were crucial in struggles for their own political and civil rights, and put forward the now-familiar argument that 'the personal is political'.

### **Learning the Complications of Hegemony, Subaltern Counterpublics and Dissidence**

This case study supports Gramsci's (1971) understanding of hegemony—the always-tentative compromise reached between those in power and varied other groups comprising democratic societies—as an ideologically driven process. Notwithstanding economic pressures for free trade as industrialisation took hold, the relationship between economic and political shifts is not always linear and predictable. Slavery could have been simply abandoned for economic reasons without being outlawed; however, the ideological challenges of British women abolitionists held sway with British politicians and the British public broadly.

Despite ideological promises of equality among citizens, democratic societies have always been characterised by marginalisation. This was evident in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain, when women, members of the lower classes, and racialised members of colonised and enslaved nations were explicitly excluded from the rights and status of citizenship. Fraser (1992) recognises that subaltern counterpublics are multiple; this case study is a reminder that they can also be also fractured. British female and male abolitionists often shared racial and class affiliations; however, they also had

varied religious, economic and philosophical affiliations. Not all abolitionists held the same beliefs about racial equality, and not all women saw in slavery a parallel for their own political exclusion. These differences eventually divided the abolitionist movement later in the nineteenth century.

British women abolitionists also recall the complexity of Sparks' (1997) notion of dissidence. Dissidents resist certain elements of socio-political hegemony, and reiterate other elements. The white, middle-class British women who participated in abolitionist boycotts protested the practice of slavery as well as a discourse of women as politically impotent, but they did this by acceding to hegemonic constructions of themselves as inherently caring and responsible for the private sphere of shopping and consumption.

Connecting social movement activism to learning, Kilgore (1999, 196) notes that '[a]n epistemology of group learning ought to consider conflicts over individual and group norms as normally recurring phenomena of social life'. It is precisely the heterogeneity of groups and social movements that explains their learning and action potential:

A group has infinite developmental possibilities, because of the diversity of its members. The various standpoints of the members – and the standpoint of the group – are in flux with regard to a larger society in flux. They act as flexible tools that interact with one another and with which the group can continue to develop collective identity, consciousness, solidarity and organisation (Kilgore 1999, 198).

There is a vital message here for critical adult educators and social activists interested in social reform. Insistence on consensus and uniformity denies the always inherent differences among members of a group or movement, and ultimately works against its dissident, democratic aims.

### **Incidental Learning and Consumption Revisited: Today's Radical Shoppers**

Today and throughout the history of democratic societies, consumerism can be seen as both contributing to and confounding democratic citizenship and human rights. Contemporary concerns about how consumption, particularly in the Global North, hampers social justice, environmental sustainability and human rights have encouraged new consumer-based education and resistance. Klotz (2002) relates earlier abolitionist boycotts to boycotts protesting South African apartheid, and Midgley (1992) mentions boycotts to protest the exploitation of Chicana workers in California's grape-growing sector. The fair trade movement speaks out against neoliberal, consumerist globalisation, which is exacerbating, rather than alleviating, the marginalisation of the Global South in global affairs and marginalised groups of citizens of countries in the Global North. Grimes

(2005, 237–238) describes this movement as a positive use of consumer power, which ‘creates a bridge between the peoples of the developing nations and those of the developed ones’ and links producers to consumers in an attempt to practice social justice. The voluntary simplicity movement aims to reorient consumers’ priorities and decisions. It urges them to be mindful of the impacts of their consumption, and to strive to decrease it, so that ‘our most authentic and alive self is brought into direct and conscious contact with the living’ (Elgin 1993, 25).

Still, as Midgley (1992) notes, consumerist strategies of resistance were and remain a largely middle-class option. Moreover, consumerism seems to have an endless ability to co-opt all forms of dissidence. As Zukin and Maguire (2004, 183) state, ‘there is the troubling capacity of consumer industries to commodify – and disarm – dissenting voices, recruiting issues of women’s empowerment, environmental sustainability, and racial equality into the service of product promotion, thus reducing social justice to the freedom to choose between products’ (Cohen 2003; Talbot 2000). Discussing the relationship between consumerism and race, place and culture in America, bell hooks (2001, 431) returns to the metaphor of cannibalism: ‘Currently, the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other’s history through a process of decontextualisation.’ The apparent ability to buy anything anywhere obscures long histories of marginalisation and oppression, as socio-cultural meaning and context are replaced by an emphasis on style and trend.

The presence of products such as slave-produced sugar in the daily lives of British consumer-citizens signified British imperial power over ‘the Other’. As important as they were, abolitionist boycotts of those products did not eliminate racial or gender marginalisation. Today’s hegemonic discourses of consumerism and neoliberalism herald the possibility of delivering the exotic and the rare, as well as heightened social status to consumer-citizens imagined as non-raced and non-gendered. At the same time, race, gender and class are continually (re-)constructed in marketing and consumption (Herrmann 2002; Zukin and Maguire 2004).

Today, critical consumers, like eighteenth- and nineteenth century boycotters, attempt to exploit the tensions inherent in consumption and citizenship to counter hegemonic ideologies and structures. New technologies, however, change the way that information is conveyed and dissidents are mobilised, and amplify another tension in consumption: like learning, it can be both solitary and social. Still, today’s critical consumers continue to exhibit the paradox of resistance, as they reaffirm elements of the hegemonic ideologies of neoliberalism and consumerism. As Herrmann (2002, 541) notes, ‘they [consumers] are admonished to regularly ask themselves, “why do I buy this?”’

as though being a critical consumer is the only form of political intervention remaining within a postmodern consumer society'. Ultimately, consumer-based resistance is intrinsically limited in its potential impact. Following that realisation, it seems important to stretch Foley's (1999, 2001) concept of incidental learning beyond settings of collective action, and to ask how unorganised actions in daily life – such as shopping and consumption – can not only give rise to individual learning but also encourage individuals to think about the continued importance of collective action as a source of learning and change. A central lesson of incidental learning is this: conscientious consumption might be a starting point for learning about and working for social justice, but citizenship and human rights cannot be reduced to things that we shop for.

## Acknowledgement

I thank Jennifer Chan-Tiberghien for her feedback on an early draft of this article, as well as the editor/reviewer(s) for helpful comments and suggestions.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The use of the term consumerism to mean an ideology is common among critical scholars; however, consumerism is also used to refer to the consumer rights movement (see Hilton 2003).
- <sup>2</sup> Midgley (1992) indicates that women’s names ‘slipped through’ (23) on some petitions.

- <sup>3</sup> As Sussman (2000) explains, the term 'boycott' replaced 'abstention' following an Irish rent strike against landlord Charles Cunningham Boycott in the 1890s.

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