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FASHIONING SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH POLITICAL CONSUMERISM, CAPITALISM, AND THE INTERNET¹

Consumers, consumer goods, brand names, logos, and corporations are increasingly important in global struggles for social justice. Global social justice networks use a variety of innovative means to encourage shoppers to consider the hidden politics behind consumer goods and corporate brand names. They are using this power of mobilization to push transnational corporations to take more responsibility for the social consequences of their policy and practice. There is also a 'pull factor' in late market capitalism in the form of new market actors, structures, and vulnerabilities that are pulling global corporations into progressive social change. This article studies the role of the outside (market external) push factor of political consumerism and the role of the inside (market internal) capitalist pull factor in fashioning global social justice. It discusses the three basic forms of political consumerism and why political consumerism has become a global political force. It uses the contemporary anti-sweatshop movement to illustrate how political consumerism puts claims on the global economy. By drawing on historical scholarship on the importance of the rise of capitalism for anti-slavery in the 1700s and 1800s, the article argues that late capitalism makes buyer-driven corporations consider global social values in their production practices. A special section focuses on how a particular case of culture jamming combines the push and pull factors to capitalize on the vulnerabilities of late capitalism by using innovative corporate Internet marketing to communicate global anti-sweatshop politics.

Keywords political consumerism; anti-sweatshop; anti-slavery; culture jamming; market vulnerabilities; social justice

Shopping with and for social justice

Consumers, consumer goods, and corporations are increasingly important in global struggles for social justice and human rights. Shopping is now an established part of social justice activism. Global social justice networks use a variety of innovative means to encourage shoppers to consider the hidden

politics behind common consumer goods and corporate brand names. 'Consumer power' is taking on a meaning beyond consumers' rights, protection, and empowerment. Activist networks are using the power of mobilization that they are accumulating through consumer consciousness-raising to push transnational corporations to take more responsibility for the social side of their policy and practice. Many corporations now are caught in a social justice 'trap'. They are pushed and pulled into human rights and social justice by everyday consumers, activists, and market forces themselves. The broad anti-sweatshop movement plays an important role in pushing global garment manufacturers to develop codes of conduct, publish corporate social responsibility reports, and keep them to their word. By bringing its concerns to the marketplace, the anti-sweatshop movement is able to use alternative consumer awareness and consumer choice to reform the means of global production. Political consumerism is showing its teeth. It is a 'push' factor that is reforming corporate globalization. But interestingly, this outside political push factor has a strange reformist bedfellow. The 'pull factor' of late capitalist niche markets are creating new market actors and structures that are pulling global corporations into progressive social change. Capitalism is helping capitalism to develop a face of social justice.

This article studies the role of political consumerism and the role of capitalism in fashioning global 'social justice'. It begins with a short overview of three basic forms of political consumerism, outlining why political consumerism has become a global political force. Then the article uses the contemporary anti-sweatshop movement to illustrate how actor-oriented political consumerism puts claims on the global garment trade to take more responsibility for the negative social justice effects of their corporate policies and practices. The next section turns to the role of capitalism. By drawing on historical scholarship on the importance of capitalism for anti-slavery, the article shows how late capitalism is gradually pulling global corporations into progressive social change. A special section focuses on how activists capitalize on the market vulnerabilities of late capitalism by using innovative corporate Internet marketing to communicate global anti-sweatshop politics.

Political consumerism's three forms

'Political consumerism' is generally defined as the use of the market as an arena for politics (Micheletti 2003, Micheletti *et al.* 2003). Two forms of political consumerism (boycotts and 'buycotts') offer citizens opportunities to bring their political issues to the marketplace and use their consumer choice among producers and products to attempt to change institutional or market practices found to be ethically, politically, and environmentally objectionable (Micheletti *et al.* 2003, pp. xiv–xv). Boycotts ask consumers to reject goods;

boycotts ask them to follow special purchasing guidelines and buy labeled goods. The third form, discursive political consumerism, uses communicative actions to take advantage of the market vulnerabilities that have risen in late capitalist market niches to create consumer awareness and change global corporate enterprises.

Anti-slavery, union, environmental, women's, ethnic, 'minority' and global trade justice groups and networks illustrate the types of movements that have brought or bring their issues to the marketplace and use political consumerism to further the causes of social justice. Historically, political consumerism tended more to be used to promote 'own group' interests. Boycotts in particular, which are the oldest form of political consumerism, were important for people marginalized in conventional politics (Friedman 1999, Micheletti 2003, chapter 2). Boycotts are still a fashionable way to influence politics and are still called to protest the social justice situation of others. The more other-oriented use of boycotts reflects the impact of corporate globalization on global social justice and the inculcation of post-materialist values among Western citizens and consumers (Inglehart 1997, Stolle *et al.* 2005). The long list of recent or on-going international boycotts includes those against Nestlé for selling of baby formula in the Third World, Shell Oil for its involvement in Nigeria, Coca-Cola for its misuse of water resources in India and treatment of workers in South American and Africa, and Nike for its lack of corporate social responsibility for workers' rights and treatment in its outsourced manufacturing.

Consumer boycotting is also on the rise. In six Western democracies it is four times more likely in 1999 than 1974 (Stolle *et al.* 2005). Americans use it to express themselves politically in consumer society (about 18 percent in 2005) as do Western Europeans (on average, 18 percent in 2002). Swedes top the boycott list with 33 percent saying that they had boycotted a product in the last 12 months, followed by 31 percent in Switzerland, and 27 percent in Finland (author's own calculation of European Social Survey 2002 data). Boycott increases have also been found in developing countries (Inglehart 1997, p. 313). They are often even more important for young people. A Swedish study reports that almost all young people between 16 and 29 years of age have actually participated or can consider participating in one (Ungdomsstyrelsen 2003, p. 171).

Interestingly, given these rises, activists are, today, more hesitant about using them. They find that boycotts may do more harm than good because they may lead to workers being laid off and because corporations have tried to manage them by moving operations to different countries rather than solving the problems on the spot. Experience shows that boycotts can also be difficult to organize and frame properly and almost impossible to call off (Friedman 2003). Their actual financial effect on targeted products and corporations is debatable (Koku *et al.* 1997, Smith 2003, Vogel 2005), and they can easily

send corporations confusing signals. How is the Walt Disney Company to respond to a boycott supported by gay rights', Christian family values, fair trade, and ethnic and minority groups? (Micheletti 2003, p. 68ff.).

Politically-motivated shopping (buycotts) is the use of labeling schemes and shopping guides for consumer choices. The most common ones offer green, organic, and fair trade product guidance. Because labeling schemes are voluntary, institutional guidelines certifying products on the basis of agreed-upon criteria, top quality ones require a good and open working relationship between corporate actors and non-governmental organizations, the policy community, and at times, government (Cashore *et al.* 2004, Jordan *et al.* 2004). Buycotting is, therefore, less contentious than boycotting, but this does not mean that corporations always support them. Some non-government associations, like the largest Swedish environmental organization, believe that buycotting is a constructive way to work on sustainable development because it directs and does not prohibit shopping, thus showing consumers that they can consume and support causes at the same time. Such labeling schemes have increased dramatically over the past decade (Nilsson *et al.* 2004). So has their market share. As of 2005, the number of fair trade importing organizations has risen by 100 percent over the previous five years; the total value of fair trade labeled goods is now about €600 million in 14 European countries, and fair trade products are now offered in over 55,000 supermarkets all over Europe (Krier 2005). Many national schemes are linked together in international labeling networks for fair trade, organic, and environmentally-friendly products. Although consumers profess high interest in them and there are individual success stories (as of 2005, e.g. 20 percent of the ground coffee sold in the UK and 47 percent of all bananas sold in Switzerland are fair trade labeled), fair trade labeled and eco-labeled goods do not penetrate major markets (Krier 2005).

Not only is buycotting a slow bloomer; it is also not always a realistic alternative. Business may not want to promote buycotts; important products for political consumerism are not labeled; product labeling can be complicated in sectors with long and fragmented commodity chains; labeled goods may be pricey; and consumers do not always find labeled goods attractive. These problems are apparent in the global garment trade. Some Clean Clothes and anti-sweatshop activists have tended to believe that the industry is too complex for labeling schemes and that most consumers find social justice labeled fashions an oxymoron (Lindfors 2005). Similarly, attempts to create criteria for gender labeling to improve gender equality have run into problems because it is not always easy to decide what and how to label (SOU 2002).

The problems with using the first two forms of political consumerism as well as changes in the corporate landscape are leading activists to devote more energy to the final form, 'discursive political consumerism'. This is defined as the expression of opinions about corporate policy and practice in

communicative efforts directed at business, the public at large, family and friends, and various political institutions (Micheletti & Stolle 2004). This form of political consumerism does not focus on influencing corporate policy and practice by using monetary transactions or their denial. Rather, it targets other vulnerable points within corporations, namely their image, brand names, reputation, and logos. Discursive political consumerism uses a variety of non-economic tools to convince the public and/or business leaders that social responsibility is good for the corporate world. Examples are culture jamming (discussed later), attempts to create public awareness, and discussion with business about the political, ethical, and environmental aspects of corporate policy and practice. Discursive political consumerism is an advocacy strategy that works well in industry sectors dominated by buyer-driven corporations. It confronts corporations without using boycotts that can jeopardize garment workers, and it offers citizens and groups a marketplace venue for their political involvement when labeling schemes are not in place. Discursive political consumerism preys on the market in a different way than boycotts and buycotts.

The push factor: anti-sweatshop's global social justice activism

Today's transnational anti-sweatshop political consumerist network has two different roots: third world solidarity groups and trade unions. For the third world movement, the cause was solidarity across borders and trade that promoted Third World industry and products as sold at third world stores (increasingly termed 'world shops'). For North American unions, the issue was unemployment caused by textile and shoe manufacturing corporations' decisions in the 1960s and 1970s to shut down their domestic plants and move them abroad. Public revelation of improper labor conditions in US garment factories and Third World factories used in outsourced manufacturing gave birth, in the late 1980s, to the contemporary anti-sweatshop movement. Concern over lack of national, regional, and global political regulatory policy about global outsourced manufacturing as well as growing fears about corporate globalization as a 'race to the bottom' for global workers' rights link a large number of diverse groups and networks together in the anti-sweatshop movement.

Old civil society associations with their emphasis on membership strength, hierarchical structures, pressure group politics, collectivist collective action, and boycotts couple up with new looser and non-membership networks that use the communicative skills of spin doctoring, the Internet, and individualized collective action to mobilize consumers into urgent actions to demand the end of sweatshop working conditions in the global garment industry (Bullert 2000, Manheim 2001, Shaw 1999).² Blue-collar unions, student groups, youth

associations, international humanitarian organizations, church community groups, consumer associations, women's organizations, third world solidarity groups, policy institutes, non-profits, fair trade centers, new social justice networks, the academic community, and others team up to fight sweatshops. They forge institutional platforms and transnational networks that do research and monitoring, offer public education, and engage in consumer and public advocacy in a joint effort to make claims on the global garment trade.

Movement actors approach sweatshop problems in diverse ways, and they also have differed on preferred forms of political consumerism. An important historical difference is between the North American and European branches. The more homogenous European branch, as illustrated by the 11-country strong membership-based Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC), reflects European traditions of corporatism and has focused more on discursive political consumerism than boycotts and labeling schemes. It meets with the industry in corporate boardrooms to exchange information, expertise, and even, as witnessed in Sweden, personnel, and to develop problem-solving alternatives. CCC does not officially call boycotts, only supports them if sanctioned by workers themselves, and admits that boycott threats called by others can benefit its goals. From the start, it focused on raising consumer consciousness through information and urgent appeals, and it mobilizes individual consumers to confront buyer-driven corporations by taking advantage of their capitalist vulnerabilities. As the CCC (2005a) puts it: 'Multinational corporations ... spend millions of dollars each year on advertising and marketing campaigns to get consumers to buy the products they are selling. Brand name companies compete intensely for consumer loyalty, and therefore consumers can influence how these companies operate.' It puts considerable effort into researching and profiling current sweatshop problems, crafting urgent warnings, and displaying them on its website. Even popular sporting events like the Olympics and World Cup Football are used as settings to get out the anti-sweatshop message that 'Olympic values of ethics and fair play' must 'be applied to the world's abused and exploited sportswear workers' (CCC 2004). In this and other ways, it focuses on broadcasting the social justice problems hidden behind brand name clothing to show solidarity with workers, trade unions, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the South, and to put pressure on corporations to take more social responsibility in their codes of conduct. Over the years, the CCC has been influenced by its more confrontational North American counterpart. It strives for more public presence and includes legal challenges as one of its objectives. National and European consumer law has been used to force global garment corporations to inform consumers about manufacturing practice and to make sure that consumer information on their corporate social responsibility work is not falsely advertised. Together with its North American cousin it has even found a

way to develop boycott political consumerism by targeting institutional consumers to improve their purchasing practices.

Boycotting political consumerism, in the form of ethical procurement policy, therefore, unites the transatlantic movement. Both branches pressure particular national and local governments (publicly accountable institutional consumers) to develop social justice-oriented procurement workwear policies, purchase no-sweat clothes for their employees, and create clean clothes communities (CCC 2005b). Their common focus is on use of taxpayers' money to pay for public uniforms produced in sweatshops. Their goal is to get citizens to pressure institutional consumers to pressure garment manufacturers. The Swedish campaign was particularly timely as 2006 was an election year (Mina skattepengar 2006). Focus on 'sweatfree' procurement policy was one of the original aims of United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), which grew out of student-union cooperation in the mid-1990s and began operations on college campuses in 1998. It focused on getting university administrations to pressure its contracted corporations to sell them no-sweat clothes. In the early days, this demand led to civil disobedience, sit-ins, and confrontations with university administrations and the police. Student activism also initially irked American-based multinational garment corporations and outraged Nike. But soon they decided that cooperation was necessary to save their university contracts (Featherstone & USAS 2002). Many universities now have ethical procurement policies. USAS as of 2006 had over 200 local chapters in North America. Today pressure is put on 'school districts, cities, states, and other institutional purchasers to adopt "sweatfree" purchasing policies and stop tax dollars from subsidizing sweatshops and abusive child labor' (Sweatfree Communities 2006). They drive this message home with culturally-resonating slogans like 'Conduct Unbecoming: Fighting for Freedom in Sweatshop Uniforms' (Behind the Label 2006a). The point is that not only individual consumers should shop with a conscience, but governments and public institutions should do so too.

Confrontation with corporate America has generally characterized the North American branch of the anti-sweatshop movement. Activists have frequently called boycotts and demonstrated against brand-name apparel corporations. They have scandalized and harshly criticized Nike and others for their corporate behavior. As mentioned earlier, student activism was initially also conflict-oriented. This approach reflects the general lack of trust between labor and corporate capital in the US, and possibly even a different business philosophy than in Europe (Schmitter 1979). Another important reason for the discord has been the goal of garment worker unionization, which has been the North American branch's general answer to solving sweatshop problems. It has fought fiercely with corporate America on this point domestically and globally. In Europe, unionization has traditionally not been a polarizing issue. Domestic sweatshops have also been a central concern for the North American branch,

and it has led to numerous alliances with ethnic and minority groups in particularly California, where scandals about sweatshops in the Los Angeles area hit the news and outraged many citizens (Liebhold & Rubenstein 1998).

Because an important movement root is domestic factory closure, many anti-sweatshops [and particularly the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and USAS] have been seen as protectionist in nature (Mandle 2000, p. 19). Over the years, the North America branch has worked with this issue. The ALF-CIO (2006) weaves concerns over job loss and third world solidarity together with appeals to consumers with these words: 'The aisles we shop are lined with products made in factories that exploit child labor and fire and harass workers when they try to improve their lives by forming unions.' Bangor Maine's CCC states: 'By linking solidarity and self-interest, people discover that they can, indeed help shape a world that reflects their basic values of fairness and common decency' (Claeson 2001, p. 16). Sweatshop Watch (2005) writes that, given multinational corporate greed is to blame, 'garment workers in every country must address their unique local needs,' and 'new global strategies and alliances are required to tackle the imminent changes in the garment industry due to free trade.' An interesting development deserving more study is the relationship between US immigrant and ethnic minority culture and solidarity with Third World workers. Anti-sweatshop activists, for example, are trying to get Hispanic inner-city youth in particular to relate sweatshop conditions in the countries of their parents' origins with the fashion marketed by global apparel corporations (Behind the Label 2006b).

Concerted efforts on the part of old and new civil society have therefore put the problem of sweatshops on the global public agenda. The highly heterogenous nature of the movement is benefiting the cause because it shows how citizens from different walks of life – no matter ethnic, citizenship, political, religious, or class affiliation – are affected by the social justice problems of sweatshop labor. What is clear is that this broad and diversified coalition is changing the social meaning of fashionable clothes. It is directing consumers' attention to the hidden politics behind desirable clothing labels and corporate logotypes and can boast of several concrete victories in getting global garment corporations to take more social justice responsibility in outsourced manufacturing. The movement has put the word 'sweatshop' back into contemporary vocabulary (Greenberg & Knight 2004). Particularly in the US, national magazines, television news programs and even local newspapers and other press report on sweatshops. Studies show that articles on sweatshops can be found on all types of newspaper pages, including the editorial, politics, business, and sports pages, and it is frequently used in cyberspace. A 2006 Google search created over three million hits. All this publicity forces garment corporations to relate to it; politicians have created institutions to deal with it (e.g. Global Compact and Fair Labor Association); social justice groups have it

as their master frame; new companies (Black spot shoes, Shoes with Souls, No Sweat, American Apparel) use it to market worker-friendly apparel; pollsters put it in their surveys; cartoonists create comic strips around it, and comedians like Jay Leno use it to joke about the hot Southern California weather; on the Tonight Show in 1998, Jay Leno joked: 'It's so hot out I'm sweating like a ten year old Malaysian kid in a Nike Factory' (MU 1999, Treehugger 2005, Trudeau 1997). The cause of sweatshop abuse resonates in the cultural, political, and corporate world. While it remains questionable to whether groups outside of corporations possess sufficient influence as to affect lasting change in global economic structures, their influence on popular perceptions of corporate conduct and the symbolic positioning of branded goods in the eyes of some consumers cannot be denied.

The pull factor: capitalism's role in progressive corporate social change

Anti-sweatshop political consumerism has pushed corporations into responsibility for sustainable development. What is interesting is that the movement has found an ally in capitalism. The principles of capitalism, as well as late capitalism's focus on the ideational aspects of selling goods, are pulling global garment corporations into social justice. This section uses historical scholarship on capitalism's role in anti-slavery and current research on buyer-driven commodity chains to show how capitalism can be pulled into work for social justice. Many historians agree that the rise of capitalism was instrumental for anti-slavery as well as slavery itself (Bender 1992). Some claim that the burgeoning industrializing working class arising along with capitalism feared the impact of slavery on free labor. Others claim that the structure and logic of market relations emerging from capitalism forced a new understanding of causation and responsibility on market actors. Both perspectives help explain how new social actors inside capitalism and market mechanisms turn the marketplace into a locus of social justice.

The social actor perspective claims that values emerging from class interest and burgeoning class society spilled over into opposition to slavery. There was a good dose of protectionism here. Slavery was a system of cheap labor that threatened British and American industrial workers and small northern US farmers. In today's anti-sweatshop vocabulary, for them to compete with it would mean their 'race to the bottom.' This fear made them consider free labor as morally and economically superior to slave labor and that the idea should have universal application. Together with the new social roles (free industrial workers, burgeoning urban middle and more educated class) and the new social order (class society) emerging in early capitalism, new social

thinking kindled concern about the situation of the workforce in relation to the production apparatus (Ashworth 1992, p. 173ff., Davis 1992).

The market-oriented school does not deny the importance of class society and its new actors in the fight against slavery. However, it claims that it was capitalist market culture that mattered most. Capitalism 'has a subliminal curriculum' and 'one of the principal lessons one learns is perception: a "widening of causal horizons," a heightened awareness of the remote consequences of both one's acts and (equally important in moral matters) one's inactions' (Bender 1992, p. 7, Haskell 1992, p. 141). For capitalist market transactions to work, market actors had to learn forethought, calculation, and gratification denial. Property ownership played an important role; interestingly, Adam Smith, the eighteenth century's important economic thinker, considered slavery and the slave trade an unnatural economic practice because it went against his basic law of human motivation that people work to acquire property (Temperley 1977). Forethought, calculation, and gratification denial created rational economic man, who learned two important lessons: promise-keeping and attention to the remote consequences of personal actions. This way of thinking became part of the knowledge or 'recipe' for capitalism, and spilled over to other societal spheres, changing general habits and conventions, shifted the conventional boundaries of moral responsibility, and '... compelled some exceptionally scrupulous individuals to attack slavery and prepared others to listen and comprehend' (Haskell 1992, pp. 155ff.).

The heterogeneous actors forming the anti-slavery movement – different Christian groups, former slaves, women suffragists, liberals, socialists, pacifists, workers' movements, political parties, and others – pitched their message to an increasingly receptive audience. Anti-slavery was even grafted onto popular culture and new consumer goods. It resonated with the times. Slave sugar, cotton, and 'the blood-sweetened beverage' tea were boycotted; consumers were offered no-slave buycott sugar for sale. By focusing on ordinary slave-produced consumer goods and particularly sugar that once was a costly luxury good, they brought the immorality of slavery close to home. Private desires and consumer choices fused with public morality. The bond of responsibility between consumer and slave is eloquently stated by a Quaker women activist: 'The West Indian planter and the people of this country stand in the same moral relation to each other, as the thief and the receiver of stolen goods ...' (as quoted in Hochschild 2005, pp. 325–326). Two centuries later similar thoughts about the bonds of responsibility that connect buyers to producers (between the distant, invisible worker and Western consumer) can be found in contemporary thinking about political responsibility (Young 2006).

These historical conclusions offer insights into the role of late capitalism in the twenty-first century's anti-sweatshop campaign. Contemporary scholarship shows that the maturing of capitalism has created a new social actor, buyer-driven commodity chain corporations, whose fiercely competitive market

position makes them highly vulnerable to the whims of ever-more fashion craving consumers and other-oriented political consumers calling for corporate social responsibility (two other social actors arising out of late capitalism). The market logic of late capitalism makes buyer-driven corporations highly dependent on consumers' trusting and consuming their ideational corporate images. Brand names put great effort in crafting themselves as giving ordinary consumers the opportunity to shop for community, hope, and 'identities and pleasures that can be accessed only through their brands' (Holt 2002, p. 72). To compete with other corporations to sell good quality fashion at reasonable prices, they spend considerable resources in designing, marketing, and branding products to cultivate the right kind of corporate image in Western consumer society (Gereffi 2001, Knight & Greenberg 2002). As indicated earlier in reference to a CCC campaign, their market position puts them in the hands of political consumers.

For buyer-driven corporations to rapidly create and satisfy fluctuating and fickle consumer taste for new fashion experiences, and to keep their marketing promise of fashion at affordable prices, these 'manufacturing without factories' businesses rely on sweatshops. As garment-making machinery cannot be revamped quickly enough to satisfy fashion whims, garment corporations have chosen to rely on the sewing hands of individual garment workers in outsourced Third World sweatshop factories (Smith 1997). Their need to keep promises to consumers and their consumer-dependence puts them into a highly vulnerable situation, one which anti-sweatshop activists gladly exploit to show the hidden politics of brand name apparel. 'The catch is that the more successful corporations have become at branding our culture and creating a certain reputation for themselves, the more vulnerable they are to disruptions of that image through exposés linking their products to sweatshop conditions' (DeWinter 2003, p. 108). The choices available to avoid corporate image scandals are limited. They can choose costly options like factory ownership or move their manufacturing back to Western countries, or they can continue to use less costly outsourcing but concede to anti-sweatshop demands. Capitalism has put buyer-driven global clothing and shoe corporations – like slave-driven production centuries ago – into a 'trap' of social justice if it is to sustain itself as capitalism.

The nature of the late capitalist apparel market niche fuels the anti-sweatshop cause and pulls garment corporations into progressive social change. Political consumers are in effect using their buyer-driven vulnerable dependence to scandalize them into using forethought, calculation, and the denial of some economic gratification to broaden their causal horizons and promise to take responsibility for global garment workers' social justice. Nike's Brand President openly admits that Nike is in a social justice 'trap': 'Corporate responsibility challenges us to take a good, hard look at our business model, and understand our impact on the world around us [...] For our company as a whole, we've set three

strategic goals: To effect positive, systemic change in working conditions within the footwear, apparel and equipment industries; To create innovative and sustainable products; and To use sport as a tool for positive social change and campaign to turn sport and physical activity into a fundamental right for every young person' (Nikebiz 2005, p. 5).

As Nike and other global garment corporations 'promise' to work on social responsibility, movement activists monitor their codes of conduct and other activities like a hawk. Code digressions are reported to corporations and consumers. Their fierce competitive environment makes them so sensitive to sweatshop publicity that even hints from the movement about future spectacular scandalous events can lead to progressive social justice corporate change (activist information communicated directly to the author, 2005).

Interestingly, scholarly efforts to end sweatshops also relies on knowledge or 'recipes' for and late capitalist market niche vulnerabilities. Political philosopher Iris Marion Young received considerable attention for her social connection model of political responsibility. Echoing ideas centuries ago, her moral argument is that Western consumers and multinational corporations have obligations of justice because of the social processes and bonds (consumption) tying them to distant others (the workers sewing our clothes, building our shoes, weaving our rugs, and picking our food). In her words (Young 2006, p. 106): 'Our actions are conditioned by and contribute to institutions that affect distant others. ... Because our actions assume these others as condition for our own actions, ... we have made practical moral commitments to them by virtue of our actions. That is, even when we are not conscious of or actively deny a moral relationship to these other people, ... we have obligations of justice in relation to them.' Institutional designers also use late capitalist market niche vulnerability and traditional capitalist recipe knowledge to stamp out sweatshops. Ratcheting Labor Standards (RLS) is one example that shows 'how open competition can save ethical sourcing' (Sabel *et al.*, nd, Fung *et al.* 2001). Its four basic principles – transparency, competitive comparison, continuous improvement, and sanctions – come from capitalist recipe knowledge, and it builds on corporate commitment (promises) to social responsibility and corporations' promise-making to review their ethical practices in internal reports and external audits and asks corporations to ratchet up their efforts and commit to implementation strategies and documentation of implementation practice. Sweatshop abolition is, thereby, gradually institutionally designed into the intensive competitive setting of buyer-driven late capitalist market niches. Corporations strive for superior social practices; monitoring firms seek to establish themselves by excelling in auditing skill and experience, and monitoring data informs increasingly choosy and political consumers about what is behind the brand name label. Continuous improvement therefore becomes part of capitalist competition for corporate goodwill, favorable consumer images, and market share.

Rubbing it in: brand vulnerability and Internet anti-sweatshop culture jamming

Anti-sweatshop activists focus on brand names because they are market leaders and have ample resources to implement changes in social justice without making consumption a pastime of the rich. Activists understand that brands also form a growing part of the social fabric of the affluent world. They are even 'an irresistible form of cultural authority' (Holt 2002, p. 72) and a universal gathering place for social identities. In short, brands anchor our lives (Ritzer 2005, p. 15). They note that brands are a prime tool of capitalism (Clifton & Maughan 2000) and how buyer-driven corporations invest highly in them to convince consumers to associate their branded products with individual dreams of personal satisfaction, reward, and enjoyment as well as attractive lifestyles, social distinction, cultural-economic empowerment – in short, the good life (cf. Norris 2004, Baudrillard 2005). Politicizing brand names reveals that they also represent the hidden social costs of production. Anti-sweatshop groups strive to hold buyer-driven corporations accountable for sweatshop abuses and for communicating a system of ideological values in their slick consumer advertisements that can even encourage some people, as happened a decade ago in inner-city America, to go so far as to venture to kill for a desirable pair of Nike shoes (Times 1990).

Anti-sweatshop concern over corporate cultural dominance is perhaps most clearly seen in culture jamming, a particular contentious, confrontational, and poignant form of discursive political consumerism that politicizes corporate logotypes and does so successfully via the Internet (Carty 2002, Illia 2002, Blood 2000). Culture jamming preys on brand vulnerabilities in its colorful, creative, funny, playful, and poignant semantic displays of politicized logos easily flashed across computer screens without considerable costs. *No Logo* author Naomi Klein (2000) calls it 'the brand boomerang'. As global brand names have become *lingua franca*, spoofs on them on the Internet resonate culturally across socio-economic and age groups as well as borders. By picking on brands with high cultural resonance, anti-sweatshop activists accentuate the connections between their cause and these important symbols in the cultural environment. In so doing, they increase the appeal of their cause by making it appear natural and familiar (Kubal 1998, p. 542). Culture jamming aims at spectacular consciousness-raising and, ultimately, value change in today's consumer societies.

A good example of how anti-sweatshop Internet culture jamming preys on brand vulnerability is the 2001 Nike Email Exchange (NEE). It shows how the push and pull factors of anti-sweatshop social justice are combined to create spectacular events with lasting effects. We identify two pull factors – buyer-driven Nike's 'ideational' product marketing and its new Internet customer service – and two push factors – the potential consumer and the intense

attention on sweatshops at the time – and briefly discuss them in this order. First, the buyer-driven Nike Corporation got pulled in a potential anti-sweatshop culture jam through its successes with ideational advertisement that associates its products with a sportive lifestyle, hip culture, community, hope, trust, freedom, and choice (Katz 1994). It made itself an open target for social justice culture jamming when it marketed its products with the slogans ‘just do it’ and ‘freedom to choose’ and decided in 2001 to launch its prize-winning Nike iD website, a new on-line communication specially invented as a benchmark for online customization and personalization (Critical Mass 2001). Second, Jonah Peretti, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) media lab Masters student interested in computer software, former billboard liberator (a form of culture jamming) and anti-sweatshop sympathizer, pushed Nike into embarrassing public discussions on working conditions in its global garment manufacturing when he ordered a pair of customized Nike shoes with the word ‘sweatshop’ on them. He placed his order at a time when many journalists in inner-city America used the word in their reports and covered sweatshop issues closely, as a ‘news peak’ on sweatshop reporting in the New York Times occurred around the year 2000 (Micheletti & Stolle 2004). When Nike repeatedly refused Peretti’s request, he wrote back: ‘Your web site advertises that the Nike iD program is “about freedom to choose and freedom to express who you are.” I share Nike’s love of freedom and personal expression. . . . My personal iD was offered as a small token of appreciation for the sweatshop workers poised to help me realize my vision. I hope that you will value my freedom of expression and reconsider your decision to reject my order.’ Peretti sent the email exchange to a few friends who forwarded it to others. Inbox to inbox, it reached an estimated 11.4 million people globally over a period of a few months (Peretti with Micheletti 2003, p. 131). The NEE culture jam that was posted, is still available on numerous anti-sweatshop websites (including CCC, Global Exchange, CorpWatch, and Campaign for Labor Rights), and turned Peretti into a public celebrity. The entire NEE story reveals key insights into the relationship between anti-sweatshop activists, markets, and consumers.

Because the culture jam joked about a big brand name and brought up a serious issue in a humorous way, it drew both ordinary consumers and politically interested people into the cause. Peretti personally received a total of 3655 emails about it. Research on the people, who sent an email,³ finds that some of them were so inspired by the culture jam that they became involved in the anti-sweatshop cause. They brought the culture jam into classrooms, family and friendship circles, and even larger settings for discussion. The NEE became a source of inspiration pushing them to do more for the cause. The emails focused on boycotts, buycotts, other ideas for culture jamming, and an exchange on sweatshop issues. A discourse analysis of the emails to Peretti shows that the NEE created a virtual community for like-minded people who

connect the anti-sweatshop cause with their consumer values. The NEE highlights how consumers can link production with consumption and become empowered to assume responsibility for sweatshop problems. Interestingly, many of the people sending emails also understood that a 'pull factor' is in place: they saw sweatshop abolition as a process of gradual reform within the framework of late market capitalism (for details see Micheletti & Stolle 2004).

Although Nike never admitted needing to take direct action on it (Nike Interviews 2004), it is clear that the NEE pushed Nike in public settings and its boardroom to think through how well its ethical conduct fits with its external ideational branding. According to Peretti, Nike assigned a public relations person for all media questions about it (Peretti, personal correspondence). In 2001 Nike issued its first Corporate Responsibility Report using the Global Reporting Initiative Guidelines and opened up to independent monitoring by the Fair Labor Association (Nike Responsibility Timeline, 2003). As of 2006 more than 16,000 workers in Nike factories have been interviewed by monitors (Nikebiz.com). The website Nikebiz.com has increasingly added information on Nike's codes of conduct, and corporate principles. Nike even took the lead to be the first global garment corporation to disclose a full list of its factory locations around the world. Clearly push and pull factors show their effect. After being in the spotlight of watchful anti-sweatshop movement groups and media attention, Nike now concedes that the corporation has moved from focusing on its own principles of corporate business to advocating common standards of corporate responsibility across the industry (Nike 2004, p. 30), although it also has to be acknowledged that such admissions are also undoubtedly a form of public relations for the company. Cartoons, national and international news reporting, media interviews with Peretti, and a discussion between Peretti and Nike spokesperson Vada Manager on the NCB's *Today Show* illustrate well how a political consumerist culture jam can establish itself in the public sphere and force Nike and others to associate affordable fashion with the word 'sweatshop' (see shey.net/niked.html). 'Every Joke is a Tiny Revolution' (Woodside 2001) appropriately sums up the role of the brand boomerang in social justice activism.

Campaigns focusing on brand names, using humor to make a moral message, and increasingly those that find ways of 'kidnapping' corporate Internet consumer advertising and customer services spotlight ethical corporate behavior and push companies to address charges of unsatisfactory corporate social responsibility. They reveal problems inherent in late capitalist production and consumption, hit buyer-driven corporations where it hurts most, and direct consumers' and public attention to the hidden politics behind desirable clothing labels and corporate logotypes. No wonder, then, that culture jamming and activism – along with business ethics and corporate social

responsibility – are now part of management training at business schools (Seymour & Moore 2000, Deegan 2001).

Consuming brands and global social justice

The rise of late capitalism refocuses our attention to consumption and to consumers as prime movers of social change. Many scholars have viewed this as a shift in the focus of power from the sphere of production to the sphere of consumption (e.g. Baudrillard 2005, Norris 2004, Young 2006, Inglehart 1997). Few scholars deny the contemporary importance of consumer society for cultural, social, and economic thinking, and many are now finding the consumer as a significant agent of political change (Micheletti 2003, Micheletti & Stolle 2007, Nava 1991, Scammell 2000). However, what these accounts miss is that capitalism itself through its market actors and market logic, can be a locus for progressive social change. Today fussy, capricious, fashion-crazed consumers and vulnerable image-oriented, buyer-driven corporate brands are making sweatshops an antithesis of productive corporate global development. These children of late capitalist niches markets apply the general and developing recipe knowledge of capitalism to gradually steer global business towards the path of global social responsibility. This pull factor is accompanied by the political consumerist push factor. Together the pull factor of capitalism and push factor of social justice activism use market logic and niche market competition to broaden the global horizon of transnational corporations, consumers, and even governments. The global market – just like the capitalistic market of anti-slavery centuries ago – is hatching a new wave of humanitarian sensibility. This time it goes under the captions of global social justice, triple bottom-lining, corporate social responsibility, and no sweat (Elkington 1998, see also Zadek 2004). The new social roles of global capitalism make corporations, shareholders, retailers, and consumers the agents of justice (O'Neill 2001, pp. 199–201). How far this ethic of social justice actually extends, however, is another matter entirely.

Notes

- 1 This article is part of a research project financed by the Swedish Council of Research entitled 'Political Consumption: Politics in a New Era and Arena'.
- 2 The concept of collectivist collective action refers to traditional notions of political participation requiring citizens to join and support member-based hierarchical associations. The concept of *individualized collective action* signals that citizens do not need the same kind of prefabricated political message and home to engage in political participation (Micheletti 2003, pp. 24–34).

- 3 The entire collection of emails received by Peretti as a result of his culture jam was provided to Micheletti and Stolle for content and discourse analysis.

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