

Abstracts

The Consumer Turn in Political Responsibility and Citizenship

by Michele Micheletti (Lars Hierta, Chair of Political Science, Stockholm University)

This article investigates how and why a growing number of civil society actors increasingly turn to the market as a complement to, or replacement of, traditional tools of political participation. After a discussion about its historical antecedents, the paper focuses on the present features of political consumerism. A section dedicated to theoretical issues introduces the concept of *individualized responsibility-taking* to explain why societal roles as consumers should be considered as political agents with responsibilities for others. Two more sections are also devoted to an investigation of political consumerism. The first section distinguishes eight broad issue areas where political consumerism is to be found, and identifies the role played by civic groups in prompting consumer action. The second section reports on a number of research findings on how civic groups inform and sensitize consumers about the public orientation of their consumption practices. The article ends with a few evaluative comments on the significance of the consumer turn in politics.

Keywords: Political Consumerism, Individualized Responsibility-Taking, Market-Based Action Repertoire, Taming of Consumption, Sustainable Citizenship.

Socio-Political Participation and Responsible Consumption: between the collective dimension and a sense of efficacy

by Federica Volpi (Institute for Educational and Training Research, Rome)

Participation has been studied from different points of view. One of the possible ways to address the topic is to interrelate it with cultural consumption, con-

sidering the relevance of both terms with regard to social cohesion and integration. The essay is designed to evaluate the interaction between participation and cultural consumption, leading to a definition of some citizens' groups with homogeneous features compared to both variables. Moreover, the essay aims to examine the groups' behaviour, compared with a phenomenon related to both cultural consumption and socio-political participation: responsible consumption. The groups' behaviour relative to this variable helps the understanding of some social dynamics and, above all, highlights the close relationship between a particular group (*the actives*) and alternative consumption behaviours. A thorough analysis of the relationship between a high degree of cultural consumption and a high degree of political participation underlines that responsible consumption is a collective action and, at the same time, finalised to and endowed with political efficacy.

Keywords: Political Consumerism, Participation, Cultural Consumption, Collective Action, Political Efficacy.

Solidarity Purchasing Groups. A *solid* proposal in a *liquid* society

by Letizia Carrera (University of Bari)

In the currently *liquid* and *uncertain* world, purchasing represents a dimension where individuals live the illusion of control over their own lives. Solidarity Purchasing Groups (or GAS, an Italian acronym for *Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale*) are an attempt to reverse this model, and to build relationships not despite but through the market and purchasing. They choose products and producers on the basis of respect for the environment and solidarity between the members of the groups, traders, and producers. GAS are rooted in a critical approach to today's global economic model and lifestyle of consumerism; individuals that feel the unfairness in this model and who are searching for a practical alternative can find reciprocal aid and advice by joining solidarity purchasing groups. They are a catalyst of political and social change. Empirical research, which completes these reflections, points out two very different ways to live this experience: "*health cares*" ("*salutisti*") and "*critical protester*" ("*contestatori critici*"). Only the second one is characterized by a strong, albeit scarcely perceptible, political impact.

Keywords: Solidarity Purchasing Groups, Purchase, Market, Civicness, Political Participation.

Social Conflict and Incomparability of Goods

by Nicolò Bellanca (University of Florence)

According to mainstream economics, rational agents choose between alternatives that are supposed to be ranked and compared. This assumption is strongly criticized by sociologists and anthropologists; it may partly hold true only when the commercial transactions sphere establishes a uniform measure: money. But what happens when a community compares social goods supplied by different institutional spheres? The rigorous equalization of any rate of exchange is replaced by a system of conventional equivalences. This system is temporary, since it changes as collective beliefs evolve; it is conflictual, because the “rates of conversion” between social goods often express relations of power among the groups themselves; and finally it is unstable, because individuals tend to develop private “rates of conversion” that are different from the collective ones. This system, despite its fragility, is a crucial tool of reproduction of a complex society. This essay discusses and analyzes some aspects of the issue.

Keywords: Incomparability, Rational Choice, Money, Conflict, Participation.

Social enterprises and relationships with the local community: embeddedness, legitimisation and representation

by Maurizio Ambrosini (University of Milan) and Paolo Boccagni (University of Trento)

The local embeddedness of social enterprises, within community-based contexts and networks, is generally taken for granted. Yet, empirical research on the matter in Italy is still poor. Even theoretical analyses often follow a prescriptive approach, as if community networking and social capital generation were natural properties of such organizations. The article elaborates on a few theoretical categories which can be helpful in operationalizing and empirically testing the third sector’s ties with local communities – whether in the start-up or during the life course of social enterprises. A case study on an EU-led funding initiative involving social enterprises is then analyzed. Special attention is given to the role of “intermediary bodies”, representative of the civil society at local level. This allows for a critical reflection on the potential and the limits of partnerships between public authorities and social enterprises. As far as these enterprises state, and as they are expected to participate in local policy-making processes, some key dilemmas emerge, such as the tension between advocacy and policy-building, or between the representation of local civil society and their active involvement in public policies. Finally, a balance is provided of the prospects for

a more “community oriented” model of social enterprise to be developed across the country.

Keywords: Social Enterprises, Community, Social Capital, Organizational Networks, Participation in The Policy-Making Process.