

Commodity Fetishism and the Ethical Power of the Senses: Turn-of-the-Twentieth-Century Consumer Activism in the United States and England

At the turn of the twentieth century, the National Consumers' League, the Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative Guild encouraged people to become ethical consumers. I argue that we can explain their attempts to do so in terms of commodity fetishism. By casting their consumer activism as an engagement with commodity fetishism, we explain: 1) the use of sensory techniques—both metaphorical and physical—to connect producers, commodities, and consumers and 2) a commitment to the ethical power of the senses. This account reveals the virtues of commodity fetishism as a tool for understanding the dynamics of consumer activism.

In Lawrence Glickman's landmark history of consumer activism in America, he identifies a "denigration of the importance of the senses" that accompanied the emergence of "modern consumer activism."¹ "The force of one's actions as a consumer," he writes, "typically extended far beyond the local, making it necessary to relegate the senses to a lesser order power, in favor of an understanding of the causal impact of consumption along the axis of distant markets."² As a consumer, one could not trust one's senses to ferret out the provenance of mute commodities, nor could one see the effects of one's actions upon distant workers. Thus, to understand the consumer as responsible for workers' distant suffering entailed the degradation of the senses as a tool for consumer activists. Yet despite such a degradation, the history of modern consumer activism is rife with appeals that rely on a commitment to the ethical power of consumers' senses, both metaphorical and physical, to perceive the conditions behind a commodity and to motivate ethical purchasing (or abstention). Glickman himself notes that abolitionists and free produce advocates "sought to make the crime of slavery tangible to the consumer...at the level of perception and affect."³ Similarly, turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists relied

¹ Lawrence Glickman, *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 47

² *Ibid.*; see also, Thomas Haskell, "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part 1", *American Historical Review*, Vol. 90, No. 2, (1985)

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80

extensively on sensory techniques to induce ethical purchasing by encouraging consumers to perceive the conditions under which physically and culturally distant others labored.

How, then, are we to understand the denigration of the importance of the senses in light of the persistent appeals to consumers premised on the ethical power of the senses to compel appropriate action? One approach to the problem might examine these sensory appeals as an expression or performance of socio-cultural, especially class-specific, tastes following Bourdieu.⁴ We might cast the sensory appeals of consumer activists as a way of playing on the sympathies of bourgeois consumers.⁵ But as this article will show, some turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists did not have bourgeois origins, which renders any account based on group tastes suspect. Another approach could explore the imaginative hedonism of consumers as soliciting such sensory appeals.⁶ In such an account, modern consumption involves an imaginative, emotional engagement with commodities for hedonistic or pleasurable reasons.⁷ Yet such an account would fail to appreciate the extent to which consumer activists pursue a very specific purpose in appealing to the senses: exposing the conditions under which culturally and physically distant others labored and branding them onto the commodities. Their imaginations were, in a meaningful sense, constrained to reconstruct the relation between the labor process and commodities from the perspective of consumers. The most promising direction for an answer

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); See also, the extensive literature on the social functions and significance of consumption: Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*, (New York: Routledge, 1979)

⁵ Consumer activism is frequently identified as a pursuit of the leisured classes and with good reason. See Jo Litter, “What’s Wrong with Ethical Consumption”, *Ethical Consumption: A Critical Introduction*, Tanis Lewis and Emily Potter, eds. (New York: Routledge Press, 2011), pp. 27-39; Matthew Adams and Jayne Raisborough, “What Can Sociology Say About Fair Trade: Class, Reflexivity, and Ethical Consumption”, *Sociology*, Vol. 42 No. 6, (2008), pp. 1165-1182

⁶ Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1987); David Graeber, “Consumption”, *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 52, No. 4, (2011), pp. 489-511

⁷ Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic*, pp. 77-95

comes from the nexus of material culture studies and consumption.⁸ By turning to material objects and concrete practices, we can raise the question of the link between consumers and goods. However, to build on such an approach we must guard against emphasizing the material qualities of goods too strongly; after all, modern forms of consumer activism are concerned with distant, imperceptible others *and* the goods they produce.⁹

To appreciate how sensory appeals reconstruct the connection between the social relations of labor and commodities from the perspective of consumers, I show that we can draw on an unfashionable source, at least in studies of consumer activism and consumption: Marx's account of commodity fetishism. By casting consumer activism as an engagement with commodity fetishism, we explain activists' reliance on the ethical power of the senses, despite the inability of consumers to perceive workers' distant suffering. This article examines how turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists in England and the United States—the National Consumers' League, the Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative Guild—employed metaphorical and physical techniques to render the distant suffering behind consumer goods sensible. I argue: to the extent that consumer activists employ sensory techniques to make the social character of work perceptible to consumers at the point of purchase, they engage the phenomenon of commodity fetishism directly.

⁸ Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1987); Alan Warde, "Consumption and Theories of Practice", *Journal of Consumer Culture*, Vol. 5, No. 2, (2005), pp. 131-153; Antoine Hennoin, "Those Things That Hold Us Together: Taste and Sociology", *Cultural Sociology*, Vol. 1 (1), (2007) pp. 97-114; Michael Dietler, "Consumption", *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies*, Dan Hicks and Mary C. Beaudry, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010);

⁹ On the tendency in material culture studies of consumption to remain local, see Ian Woodward, "Consumption as Cultural Interpretation: Taste, Performativity, and Navigating the Forest of Objects", *The Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, Jeffrey Alexander, Ronald Jacobs, and Philip Smith, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 671-697; for an example, see Benjamin Coles and Philip Crang, "Placing Alternative Consumption: commodity fetishism in Borough Fine Foods Market, London" in *Ethical Consumption*, Tania Lewis and Emily Potter, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 87-102

To do so, I first explain the phenomenon of commodity fetishism. Further, I show how the phenomenon speaks to the inability of consumers to perceive the social relations of production in the commodities they purchase. Then, I discuss the historical context and significance of turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists in England and the United States. In particular, these activists sought to legitimize the consumer as a universal, socially powerful identity with responsibilities to those who produce commodities. Next, I examine the sensory techniques employed by these consumer activists, drawing on meeting minutes, trade publications, annual reports, propaganda, and newspapers. I show that these strategies sought to connect the social relations of production to the commodity at the point of purchase by means of metaphorical and physical “seeing”. After comparing turn-of-the-twentieth-century activists with their historical predecessors, I offer some suggestions about future comparative research and commodity fetishism as an analytical tool for studying consumer activism and consumption.

Commodity Fetishism as a Problem of Consumer Sense

Commodity fetishism is a controversial phenomenon. Consequently, it is important to clarify what commodity fetishism means and its implication for consumers. In the following section, I argue that Marx’s account of commodity fetishism points to a basic problem of consumer sense perception in a capitalist society—the consumer’s inability to perceive the social relations of production in the commodity.

Marx describes commodity fetishism as a “definite social relation between men themselves which assumes...the fantastic form of a relation between things.”¹⁰ The social relations of commodity producers become evident only in the act of exchange, which entails a relation between two commodities—money and the specific good or goods purchased. We are

¹⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans Ben Fowkes, (New York: Vintage, 1977), p. 165.

unable to perceive the social relations of production that precede our exchange and use of commodities. This is why Marx writes, “If I state that coats or boots stand in a relation to linen because the latter is the universal incarnation of abstract human labor, the absurdity of the statement is self-evident.”¹¹ Commodity fetishism entails this inability to perceive the elaborated social organization of concrete labor relations as anything but immaterial, “suprasensible” aspects of the commodity form. The labor process is obscure to the consumer at the point of exchange; thus, consumers attribute qualities to the goods themselves rather than the elaborate network of labor relations out of which the goods emerge. It follows that this fetish character refers, in a practical sense, to the experience of the consumer who purchases a given commodity.¹² In virtue of the foregoing, the fetish of commodities would be a common way that consumers perceive or, better, fail to perceive the labor process when they purchase a good.

So commodity fetishism entails, as one consequence, the inscrutability of a good’s elaborate production to the person who exchanges for it (a consumer). But, at least from the perspective of the consumer, this inscrutability is not a simple problem of ignorance that can be demystified by teaching the consumer where goods come from; it inheres in a society characterized by the private production of goods for exchange on the market.¹³ How so? Because the commodity, as Marx repeatedly tells us, *appears* a trivial, obvious thing in the act of exchange.¹⁴ No amount of knowledge of where the good comes from will resolve the experience

¹¹ Ibid., p. 169

¹² Ibid. pp. 165, 166, 167, 169

¹³ Ibid. p. 165; In a capitalist society, production for the market is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a good to earn the name of commodity. A good becomes a commodity given two other conditions, an extensive division of labor and a regime of private property. See Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, pp. 169-173. Also, A.V. Balu, “Marxian Political Economy: Part Two”, *Social Scientist*, vol. 4, No. 11 (1977), pp. 47-48.

¹⁴ Throughout the section, Marx refers to the appearance of the commodity in contrast with the subtleties that arise through its analysis. The “appearance” Marx refers to occurs by and through the exchange of goods. Take, for instance, his discussion of how useful objects become commodities: “Since the producers do not come into social

of commodity fetishism in a capitalist society. This is one implication of Marx's statement that it was "absurd" to treat commodities as the "universal incarnation of abstract human labour." As consumers, our experience of commodities as obvious things is not a perceptual error. At the point of exchange, consumers are unable to perceive the commodity in terms of the elaborate social relations of production from which the commodity originated. Commodity fetishism is a simple account of consumer experience in a society governed by the private, unorganized production of goods for exchange on the market.¹⁵ The account has direct implications for the connection between the capitalist labor process, the commodity that results, and the consumer who purchases the commodity.

But why should we begin from the premise of commodity fetishism when seeking to analyze consumer activism? Such an approach contravenes settled sociological wisdom in the study of consumption. Many sociologists avoid Marxian phenomena in the study of consumption for at least two reasons: (1) commodity fetishism entails a negative evaluation of consumers and consumption and (2) it negates the meanings that consumers attribute to their purchases. First, they claim that Marxian descriptions of consumption entail negative value judgments of purchasing and use.¹⁶ One need not dig very deeply into Marx's writing to find statements that impugn consumers. For instance, Marx observes "by equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labor as human labour. They do this without being aware of it."¹⁷ One could take this as a negative value judgment and many

contact until they exchange the products of their labour, the specific social characteristics of their private labours appear only within this exchange." p. 165

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 169

¹⁶ On negative value judgments, see Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, p. 204; Woodward, "Consumption as Cultural Interpretation", p. 685; Sharon Zukin, *Point of Purchase: How Shopping Changed American Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 254; John Torrance, *Karl Marx's Theory of Ideas*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 112-120

¹⁷ Marx, *ibid.* p. 166

do.¹⁸ But as I have suggested, we need not interpret commodity fetishism as only a problem of mistaken belief or delusion.¹⁹ It is more usefully treated as a necessary response to the commodity form that can result in intellectual confusion. In this way, we can appreciate the practical implications of commodity fetishism as a practical. It need not be a gratuitous indictment of consumers. From the abolitionist movement and early twentieth century consumer activists to the contemporary Anti-Sweatshop movement and the organic movement, these groups have directed their activism toward purchasers who cannot perceive the social relations of production across a range of different commodities—sugar, rum, clothing, fruits and vegetables, information technology, and many others.

The second issue concerns Marx's dismissal of the meanings that actors attribute to their own consumption. Just as with the first objection, there is a grain of truth to such claims. The section on commodity fetishism, as Luke Sutherland argues, satirizes bourgeois economists and bourgeois consumers.²⁰ Furthermore, Marx himself had little patience for or analytical interest in the consumer. But I argue that we can use commodity fetishism to illuminate the meanings that people attribute to consumption. In fact, sociologists can draw on commodity fetishism to investigate the significance or meaning of purchasing practices within the broader context of the

¹⁸ Daniel Miller, "Consumption as the Vanguard of History: A Polemic By Way of an Introduction", *Acknowledging Consumption: A Review of New Studies*, Daniel Miller, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 28; Woodward, "Consumption as Cultural Interpretation", p. 685; Torrance, *Karl Marx*, pp. 119-120

¹⁹ I see no reason to follow Torrance in using the language of delusion to describe commodity fetishism as a phenomenon. Torrance conflates the practical or phenomenal experience of commodity fetishism with the intellectual errors it occasions. If commodity fetishism is delusional, it is a delusion with a practical basis in the social organization of production, circulation, and exchange in capitalist societies. Thus, it has a certain phenomenal or apparent truth. To call it a delusion requires an analytical perspective on the dynamics of capitalist production, which is precisely what Marx exemplifies in *Capital*. If anything, bourgeois economists are in the thrall of such delusions. As consumers, Marx himself, bourgeois economists, laborers, and everyone else would be subject to the same practical "delusion."

²⁰ Sutherland argues that the German word "Gallerte", which has been rendered in English as "congealed", plays on the meaning of a specific commodity—a gelatinous substance used in jams, jellies, and the like, which consists of boiled animal tissue, bones, fat, and muscle. As such, Marx's decision to render the human labor that lies behind the commodity form as "Gallerte" satirizes bourgeois consumers as cannibals. Luke Sutherland, "Marx in Jargon", *world picture 1*, (Spring 2008), pp. 1-25.

supply chain that makes it possible. Those who study consumer practices remind us that people have the ability to attribute meanings that are unconstrained by, or at the very least relatively independent of, processes of production and circulation.²¹ But I argue that commodity fetishism describes an issue that confronts anyone who seeks to incorporate the processes of production and circulation into the meanings of purchasing in capitalist societies.

As a practical issue, commodity fetishism highlights obscure relations between the labor process and commodity in the eyes (and senses) of the consumer.²² But it does not follow that by highlighting such a practical issue, one must ignore the meanings that consumers attribute to their purchases. More importantly, when that practical issue becomes a problem for consumers, it *is* central to the meanings that consumers attribute to their purchases: the consumer activists I will discuss are a case in point. As such, commodity fetishism shapes the meaning of their techniques for encouraging ethical purchasing. Even common sensory metaphors take on a specific, concrete meaning that becomes evident once we frame them in terms of commodity fetishism: they seek to illuminate the relations between producers and commodities for consumers.²³ Consumer activism offers an opportunity to examine one instance where people use this practical issue to incorporate labor conditions into the meaning and significance of consumer practices. To put it simply, commodity fetishism can serve as a tool to explore the way that some consumers attribute meanings to purchases on account of the relations between the labor process,

²¹ For a sample, see Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic*; Yiannis Gabriel and Tim Lang, *The Unmanageable Consumer*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Press, 2006); Daniel Miller, *Consumption and its Consequences*, (New York: Polity Press, 2012)

²² Commodity fetishism is not only about this obscure relation between the labor process and the commodity in the eyes of the consumer, but I focus on this issue because of its direct relevance to the experience that consumer activists themselves address. On the broader implications of the phenomenon, especially for the intellectual errors of bourgeois economists, see Torrance, *Karl Marx's Theory of Ideas*. pp. 112-120, 165

²³ On the issue of visual metaphors, especially see Anthony Woodiwiss, *The Visual in Social Theory*, (London: The Athlone Press, 2001); Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: the Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993); Hal Foster, ed. *Vision and Visuality*, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988)

commodities, and consumers. Rather than override the meanings that people attribute to their purchasing, commodity fetishism can help explain one meaning that activists reach for often.

Early 20th Century Consumer Activists

At the turn of the twentieth century, the National Consumers' League, Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative Guild sought to illuminate the relations between producers and commodities for consumers. By exploring who these groups were and how they did so, we will see how these consumer activists engaged with the phenomenon of commodity fetishism. These groups committed themselves to the consumer as an agent of social change in a way that legitimated that consumer as an ethical actor. As such, these activists offer an important case of modern consumer activism, instances of which have been evident since the Anti-Slavery campaigns of the eighteenth century up through the present. They identified consumers as *universal* actors with *moral responsibilities to distant others* and the social power to remedy unfavorable conditions.²⁴

Historians point to the turn of the twentieth century as a crucial moment in the modern era, especially for consumption in the industrializing West.²⁵ The National Consumers' League, Co-operative Wholesale Society, and Women's Co-operative Guild were three groups that sought to mobilize consumers, as consumers, in the period from 1880s until the end of World War I. During this period, England and the United States were the two wealthiest countries in the

²⁴ For analogous discussions, see Glickman, *Buying Power*, pp. 7-13; Tania Lewis and Emily Potter, *Ethical Consumption: A Critical Introduction*, pp. 7-8; Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser, eds. *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times*, (New York: NYU Press, 2012), pp. 5-8

²⁵ Emily S. Rosenberg, ed. *A World Connecting: 1870-1945*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press); James Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Lawrence Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Erika Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

world, using GDP per capita.²⁶ Furthermore, in wealthy industrializing countries the figure of the consumer loomed large with the rise of trusts, growing mass production, and department store culture.²⁷ Both the National Consumers' League and the Woman's Co-operative Guild offered full-throated accounts of consumer power, universality, and ethical duties. Furthermore, the Co-operative Wholesale Society joined this chorus by casting themselves as a consumers' movement. These activists' can be usefully understood as part of the transatlantic discourse of progressivism, focused as they were on addressing similar social questions of wealth concentration, mass production, immigration, and urbanization.²⁸ As such, my purpose is not to compare the National Consumers' League (NCL), Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS), and Women's Co-operative Guild (the Guild). Further, by placing consumer activism in an international framework, I depart from a tendency—especially in historical research—to treat such activism as a national issue.²⁹ To reconstruct their understanding of the consumer and their sensory techniques for creating ethical consumers, I rely on a range of archival sources: meeting minutes, newspapers, publications, annual reports, conference reports, and propaganda.

In 1890, a number of women founded the Consumers' League of New York City. A federated National Consumers' League emerged nine years later. It incorporated a host of regional and local groups of middle- and upper-class white women, predominantly, who sought to reform workplace conditions by encouraging ethical purchasing and state regulation of labor

²⁶ Angus Maddison, *Contours of the World Economy 1-2030 AD: Essays in Macro-Economic History*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 264

²⁷ Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*, pp. 142-177; Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Lise Shapiro Sanders, *Consuming Fantasies: Labor, Leisure, and the London Shop Girl, 1880-1920*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press).

²⁸ Daniel Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age*, (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

²⁹ This is especially true of research that address the period prior to World War II. For example, Frank Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption, and Civil Society in Modern Britain*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Matthew Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Glickman, *Buying Power*

conditions. They did so by investigating working conditions, publicizing the frequently disturbing results, and organizing campaigns for ethical purchasing and legislative changes. In their constitution, they emphasized “the duty of consumers to find out under what conditions the articles they purchase are produced and distributed[.]”³⁰ The group participated in the efflorescence of voluntary reform work associated with the progressive era.³¹ The league membership counts were relatively low. There were roughly 7,000 members in 1906 and upwards of 15,000 dues-paying members at the dawn of the First World War.³² Such numbers underestimate the reach of the League as they often drew on larger networks of clergy and women’s clubs to disseminate league campaigns broadly.³³

The Co-operative Wholesale Society has its roots in mid-nineteenth century England. A group of working men sought to pool their purchasing power in order to cut out middlemen and find better prices on staple goods. The group developed local co-operative stores where members could purchase food, clothing, and household items. The stores were collectively owned by the members, who received a quarterly dividend on purchases made in the store. These local stores were incorporated into the CWS and members were encouraged to participate in annual meetings, local co-operative projects, and their communities. While they retained their identity as a working-class organization, by the 1880s and 90s the CWS began to tout the co-operatives as an organization of consumers. In 1913, prominent co-operator Percy Redfern employed this

³⁰ *NCL Annual Report, 1900-01*

³¹ Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*; Michael McGerr. *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920*. (New York: New Press, 2003); Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, (New York: Vintage, 1955)

³² Landon Storrs, *Civilising Capitalism: The National Consumers’ League, Women’s Activism, and Labor Standards in the New Deal Era*, (Chapel Hill: UNC-Chapel Hill Press, 2000), p. 26; Kathryn Kish Sklar, “The Consumers’ League White Label Campaign, 1898-1918” in *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century*, Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern, and Matthias Judd, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

³³ For example, see Florence Kelley, “The Committee of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs on the Industrial Problem as it Affects Women and Children”, *American Journal of Nursing*, Vol. 1, No. 11 (Aug. 1901), pp. 813-815

now common understanding to describe the ultimate purpose Co-operative movement. Redfern described the early co-operators as “voyagers” who came across an organic commonwealth accidentally “when they discovered the consumer, and found that everybody is a consumer and that an organization of consumers is an organized whole.”³⁴ Upon the outbreak of the First World War, the Co-operatives could claim over three million members and their total capital placed them as one of the twenty largest companies in England.³⁵

The Women’s Co-operative Guild was formed in response to the exclusion of women from direct membership in co-operative societies. In most co-operative societies, women were permitted to be members only through their spouses. To facilitate women’s participation in the co-operative movement, several women formed an association of Co-operative women in 1883. By 1884, the group became known as the Women’s Co-operative Guild. Like their brethren in the CWS, the Guild was committed to the co-operative movement. But they did not always march in lockstep with the CWS. The Guild often challenged the CWS on issues ranging from the labor conditions of co-operative employees to divorce laws. However, like the NCL and the CWS these women were committed to the transformative power of consumers. Throughout the period, the Guild developed a robust program of social activism from investigations of workplace issues to the promotion of ethical purchasing. Their membership, while smaller than the CWS, grew to 30,000 members by the First World War.³⁶

Despite their differences, these groups were all committed to an understanding of the consumer as universal, socially powerful, and morally responsible for the totality of the social relations of production. Each of these groups appealed to consumers and appealed to others on

³⁴ Percy Redfern, *The Story of the C.W.S. 1863-1913*, (Manchester: The CWS, 1913), p. 291

³⁵ Peter Gurney, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption, 1870-1930*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 19-20.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 19

behalf of consumers because everyone was a consumer. In Percy Redfern's words, the co-operators discovered that everybody is a consumer. Members of the Women's Guild agreed in principle, but as one member noted, "[t]he unit of the co-operative movement is the *customer*—almost invariably a woman."³⁷ Both treat co-operation as a consumers' movement—one that represents the consumer as fundamental. Similarly, Florence Kelley of the NCL asserted: "The first principle of the league is universality. It recognizes the fact that in civilized community every person is a consumer."³⁸ The consumer was universal as opposed to the particularistic interests of businessmen and laborers, especially. For these activists, the consumer was a universal identity and that justified their focus on them.

In addition, the consumer was also socially powerful. Each of these groups identified the consumer as an "employer" of sweatshop and tenement labor.³⁹ Such rhetoric suggests that consumers—not producers or owners—dictated the social relations of production. Most strikingly, the NCL insisted that "the majority of employers are virtually helpless to maintain a high standard as to hours, wages, and working conditions under the stress of competition[.]"⁴⁰ One CWS member portrayed laborers or businessmen as "powerless" when compared to consumers.⁴¹ Members of the Women's Guild described consuming as "the greatest of all earthly

³⁷ "The Co-operative Store: Paper I. Committees, Members, & Employes." M.C. Spooner. n.d. *Women's Co-operative Guild*. p. 3 [italics in original]

³⁸ It is also worth mentioning the implicit limits of the League's universalism. Only "civilized" communities were included, which restricted the aims of these groups to consumers in industrializing regions. "Aims and Principles of the Consumers' League," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Nov., 1899), pp. 289-304

³⁹ "The Cost of Cheapness", *Co-operative News*, 04/08/1905, p. 410; "Plain Talk", *Co-operative News*, Woman's Corner, 07/07/1906, p. 814; "The Responsibility of the Consumer", *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 32, Supplement 22. Child Labor and Social Progress. Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Meeting of the National Child Labor Committee (Jul., 1908), pp. 108-112

⁴⁰ "Constitution", National Consumers' League, 1899.

⁴¹; "The Consumer", Rosalind Nash, *The Co-operative News*, Woman's Corner, 01/1/1890;

powers.”⁴² When co-operators insisted that they were a movement of consumers, this is the image of social power that they conjured.

While the power rested with consumers, so did responsibility for working conditions—the third feature of this shared understanding of the consumer. As an “employer” of labor, the consumer was responsible for choices that contributed to poor labor conditions. The NCL wrote consumer’s moral duties into their constitution: “the responsibility for some of the worst evils from which producers suffer rest with consumers who seek the cheapest markets regardless how cheapness is brought about.”⁴³ Similarly, co-operators were keen to remind people of their duties as consumers. A member of the Women’s Guild noted that “the strongest reason...in favor of co-operative production has been that it meant good wages, shorter hours, and good conditions for the workers.”⁴⁴ A co-operative op-ed about the “sweated” manufacture of matches, for instance, conjoined laments about suffering workers with a reminder of the purchaser’s duty.⁴⁵

This commitment to the ethical consumer sometimes resulted in conflicts with laborers, many of whom took umbrage with the claim that consumer deserved a privileged role in social life. For the most part, the NCL, CWS, and the Women’s Guild sought to chart a path through the field of labor activism that generated as little conflict with labor reformers as possible—whether socialist radicals, trade unionists, or paternalistic conservatives. The NCL—a decidedly upper-middle class, women’s group led by a socialist—sought to remain nonpartisan. They attempted to support working people, especially women and children, without appearing to be a

⁴² “The Woman with the Basket”, *Co-operative News*, Woman’s Corner, 01/02/1909, pp.22-23

⁴³ “Constitution”, National Consumers’ League, 1899.

⁴⁴ “How to Increase Loyalty”, Woman’s Corner, *The Co-operative News*, 10/02/1909, p. 1281; see also, “A Homely Chat to Homely Folk on Co-operators and Co-operating”, *The Manchester and Salford Co-operative Herald*, Vol. XX, pp. 242-251

⁴⁵ “Sweating”, Thomas McKinney, *The Co-operative News*, 08/27/1892.

labor group.⁴⁶ In practice, this meant that the League worked more closely with trade unions and politicians, many of whom were paternalistically concerned to prevent civil unrest, than the radical wing of labor reformers.⁴⁷ Both the CWS and the Women's Guild styled themselves as a movement for working-class improvement. In fact, many co-operators were members of trade unions.⁴⁸ But they often insisted that the consumer was a privileged identity over that of the worker. This sometimes resulted in conflicts with trade unionists, especially, who attempted to unionize co-operative industries. Concerns about labor sometimes put the Guild at odds with the CWS, especially in the early 1900s when the Guild supported a union of co-operative store employees in their conflict with the CWS over an increase in the minimum wage.⁴⁹ In any case, co-operators positioned themselves as friends of labor and as a movement to transform society from competitive to co-operative principles. Practically, co-operators sat uneasily between trade unionists and radical socialists. For both groups, however, their commitment to the consumer shaped their interactions with other labor reformers. In this, we can see the distinctively positive spin that activists placed on the role of the consumer as an agent of social change.

Consumer Activists' Sensory Techniques

In promoting the ethical consumer, the National Consumers' League, Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative Guild appealed to consumers' senses in a

⁴⁶ At a 1902 meeting of the Executive Committee, one member reported happily that, "the Trades Union in general show a friendly spirit toward us." See "Report on the Executive Committee Meeting", *National Consumers' League Archives*, Reel 16, Slide 35. But the NCL remained nonpartisan in their public presentation. Unless one could marshal incontrovertible evidence of antipathy by businesses, e.g. refusal to bargain with workers, the League insisted on remaining neutral.

⁴⁷ The League had members and sympathizers across the spectrum of labor reformers. Florence Kelley, the League's leader, was a committed socialist. Josephine Shaw Lowell, a founder of the first Consumers' League in New York City, was involved with the paternalistic Charity Organization Society. On the former, see Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work: The Rise of Women's Political Culture, 1830-1900*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). On the latter, see David Huyssen, *Progressive Inequality: Rich and Poor in New York, 1890-1920*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

⁴⁸ See Gurney, *Co-operative Culture*, pp.

⁴⁹ The 27th Annual Report of the Women's Co-operative Guild, May 1909-1910, pp. 1-2.

range of ways. I distinguish between two sensory techniques: metaphorical and physical. Metaphorical techniques involve the use of sensory metaphors as a tool for joining images of working conditions to commodity for consumers. By expanding consumers' capacity to perceive the social relations of labor behind commodities, these activists hoped to motivate ethical purchasing. Physical techniques depended on consumers' senses—usually vision—to associate commodities with previously unseen working conditions and to see those conditions themselves. While physical techniques built on metaphorical ones, they demonstrate that consumer activists relied on more than imagination to stimulate ethical purchasing. It is true, of course, that physical techniques involve the imagination and metaphor. As such, these techniques are not at all mutually exclusive. But the distinction highlights a practical difference—reliance on imagined senses or on physical ones to initiate the path to ethical purchasing. In both metaphorical and physical techniques, these activists' reconstructed consumers' sense perceptions in order to encourage ethical purchasing. In so doing, they often addressed the obscurity of the labor process in consumers' engagements with commodities; as I demonstrated, this situation is inherent to commodity fetishism. I call this tendency to rely on the compelling power of sense perception—metaphorical or physical—a commitment to the ethical power of the senses.

a) Techniques of Appealing to the Senses Metaphorically

The NCL, the CWS, and the Women's Guild suffused their rhetoric with sensory metaphors and imagery to encourage ethical purchasing. These metaphorical strategies took two distinct, but interrelated forms. First, these activists used sensory metaphors as a way to describe changes in consciousness. The sensory powers were a means of encouraging moral action. Such metaphors are common in Western culture and do not in and of themselves tell us anything about activists' engagement with commodity fetishism. Second, activists' employed sensory metaphors

to make consumers perceive or imagine the social conditions of labor and attach such images to commodities, despite their inability to physically perceive them. These metaphors reveal consumer activists' direct engagement with commodity fetishism. Such enhanced perceptions attempted to represent the social relations of production to consumers by means of the commodity. Moreover, they were intended to motivate a specific act—ethical purchasing. Because activists relied on the ethical power of the senses to connect producers, commodities, and consumers, they addressed an issue in capitalist societies as opposed to generic issues that attend any social division of labor. Further, I show that these distinct metaphorical techniques were often employed together. In the process, even generic metaphors for consciousness intimated the consumer's ability to imagine the conditions of production.

In official publications and literature, consumer activists used sensory metaphors, especially visual ones, to describe the transformation in consciousness that consumer activists sought. In the League's Second Annual Report, Florence Kelley described the NCL as a "practicable method" for mobilizing the pity and ethical sentiments of consumers. Later in the report, Kelley asked whether purchasers could be induced to give preference to justly made goods, by which league members meant goods made in clean environments by workers treated fairly. In addition to growing numbers of Consumers' League members, Kelley answered with the following: "In view of our investigation, the bargain counter is seen in a new light...The point is henceforth to *know how the cheapness of our bargains is attained.*"⁵⁰ The task of the consumer activist was to attach emotions such as pity to the knowledge of existing conditions. Where could one turn to induce such an attachment? The NCL sought to cultivate a spirit that "...changes passive approval, appropriation, and sympathy into that dynamic conscience which

⁵⁰ *NCL Annual Report, 1900-01.*, p. 14, italics in original

constrains its owner to *look* into a subject and act upon the convictions gained in *looking*.”⁵¹ Kelley employed a visual metaphor for the League’s work to transform consciousness. By looking into the origins of the commodities they buy, consumers would learn to purchase justly.

Percy Redfern, a prominent member of the CWS, identified producing and consuming powers, with a clear sensory bent: “The powers of producing and consuming are to the normal human being as left hands and right. Or, better, still, the hands are the producers, and the mouth that eats and the eyes that see the beauty of the world are consuming powers and those that feed the desires of the heart by which the hands are governed.”⁵² Vision and taste, the consuming powers, nourished the heart and, by extension, *guided* the hands that produced. In this vein, the Women’s Guild rendered an iconic image of “The Woman with the Basket”, woven basket resting on her knee, gazing out across an urban, industrial landscape into a sunlit sky. This woman possessed the earthly power to shape and reshape not only what was produced, but the lives of those that produced it. She was depicted in terms of her power to see beyond her immediate surroundings [see Figure 1]. Taken on their own, these sensory metaphors for knowledge and consciousness reflect a common use in Western culture.

But in other instances activists blended sensory metaphors for consciousness with sensory metaphors that attempted to bridge the gap between producers and consumers. In these instances, we can appreciate how these sense metaphors address the fetish of the commodity, not simply a generic tendency to associate the senses with imagination. Perceiving the cloistered processes of production became the source of conviction, a means of transfiguring passive sympathy into an active ethical practice. One member of the Women’s Guild captured this sentiment in an 1892 essay entitled “Shopping”: “It does seem strange, when we think of it, how

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 14, italics added for emphasis

⁵² *The Story of the C.W.S.* 1863-1913, p. 291.

lightly and thoughtlessly we go out shopping, how easily we let the money slip through our fingers, money that has cost thought and toil and weariness.” Later in the essay the author, a member of the Women’s Guild identified as Katy, lamented, “If we could only have a ‘magic mirror’ that would show us the beginning and end of the ‘bargains’ and cheap goods which look so attractive...we should need no more arguments.”⁵³ Her sympathetic prose invited readers to peer into the dingy, desolate rooms where anonymous goods were produced and to see the “pale women and girls” who produced them. Moreover, her use of ‘we’ asked readers to identify as a consumer, whose duty it was to remedy inhumanely sweated labor and other unjust conditions through conscientious purchasing. In describing the work of the Consumers’ League of New York, Maud Nathan drew on sensory metaphors to render the “dark places” where “unseen and unheard” workers toiled in dismal conditions. Like Katy, Nathan reported, “those who go down into the depths, never return with the same light hearts.”⁵⁴ Sensory metaphors could be offered to encourage both a change in consciousness and to reveal the social relations of production behind commodities from the perspective of the consumer.

Members of Co-operatives and the NCL employed sensory metaphors in their laments about consumers’ failure to perceive as well. An editorial on “The Poor Consumer”, a popular figure in co-operative rhetoric, bemoaned the noxious influence of advertising on the consumer and asked, “Will the consumer also awaken from his long Rip van Winkle sleep and rub his eyes till the truth dawns upon him?”⁵⁵ Florence Kelley suggested that a failure to see undermined the power of the purchaser: “The power of the purchaser, which is potentially unlimited, becomes

⁵³ Katy. “Shopping” in *Co-operative News*, 06/11/1892, pp. 638-9. This essay, as well as another, shared the first prize in a Women’s Guild competition to discuss the significance and practice of shopping. Both this essay and the other, “Shopping and How to Do it”, make explicit reference to the conditions under which goods were produced.

⁵⁴ “Forward by the President”, *The Work of the Consumers’ League of the City of New York*, 1915. p. 6

⁵⁵ “The Poor Consumer”, Editorial in *The Co-operative News*, 11/17/1906, p. 1354

great, in practice, just in proportion as purchasers become organized and enlightened, place themselves in direct communication with the producers, inform themselves exactly concerning the conditions of production and distribution, and are able thus to enforce their own will instead of submitting to the enticement and stimulus of the unscrupulous advertising seller.”⁵⁶ The failure to see also allowed consumers to be manipulated by unscrupulous merchants and advertisers. In an article from 1908, Kelley described the responsibilities of the consumer to the “unseen young servants” who both manufacture and deliver goods.⁵⁷ These visual metaphors provided tools for consumers to perceive the social organization of labor in their engagement with commodities. Furthermore, they steeled the consumer against the appeals of advertisers, who made it more difficult to overcome the mystifications of the commodity form in practice.

Sometimes, however, consumer activists lamented their dependence on sensory techniques. In justifying the League’s use of exhibits (see next section), Florence Kelley expressed her frustration in relying on visual techniques as follows: “We are an eye-minded nation. We love shows and pictures of all kinds. We buy our food and clothes according to the shop window displays, or to pictures and legends painted on barns and hoardings, or printed on the covers of magazines...the multitude of thoughtless spenders are guided by their eyes.”⁵⁸ But Kelley’s lament did not pave the way for different techniques. Rather, she treated this sensory dependence as a fact: “The exhibit is prepared and kept in circulation in recognition of these facts.”⁵⁹ Co-operatives expressed similar concerns. One co-operator explained that a longstanding suspicion of advertising “died hard”, despite the ill-effects on co-operative trade:

⁵⁶ “Aims and Principles of Consumers’ Leagues”, Florence Kelley. *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 5, No. III, Nov. 1899.

⁵⁷ “The Responsibilities of Consumers”, Florence Kelley. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 32, Supplement 22. Child Labor and Social Progress. Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Meeting of the National Child Labor Committee. p. 109

⁵⁸ “Report of the Secretary”, *NCL Annual Report 1914-1917*, pp. 20-21

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 21

“Paint, paste, and polish would not be necessary, and glare and glitter could very well be done without.”⁶⁰ Many co-operators viewed advertising as manipulation, which clashed with the co-operative educational mission. But despite these reservations, Co-operators advertised and the NCL appealed to the eye-minded nation.

Overall, these metaphorical techniques involved creative attempts to transform consciousness and, frequently, to render the social relations of producers sensible to consumers at the point of exchange. While it would be a mistake to claim that all of activists’ sensory metaphors addressed the fetish of the commodity directly, those imaginative attempts to illuminate obscure chains of working conditions *and* connect them to consumer goods clearly did so. Furthermore, we have seen that activists often combined these metaphorical strategies in practice. This reveals how attempts to penetrate the commodity fetish reshape the meaning of consumption. Rather than simply replicate a common linguistic practice in English, activists attached a more precise meaning to the use of sense metaphors. Thus, when Florence Kelley identified the “convictions gained in looking”, even though she used a generic sense metaphor for the imagination, the metaphor resonated with the attempt to unmask the commodity form. In fact, Kelley employed that language in response to the question, “could purchasers be induced to give the preference to goods made under the right conditions.”⁶¹ These sensory metaphors advanced the project of ethical purchasing explicitly. For consumer activists, to look into the issue of one’s purchasing decisions required one to imaginatively perceive the labor that resulted in the commodity. Both kinds of metaphorical appeals suggested the ethical power of the senses—a direct connection between perceiving unjust working conditions and ethical action. For the NCL, the CWS, and the Women’s Guild, these sensory metaphors would encourage

⁶⁰ “Time and Trade: Should Co-operative Societies Advertise?”, R., *Co-operative News*, 09/04/1909, p. 1137

⁶¹ “Report of the Secretary”, *NCL Annual Report*, 1900-1901, p. 12

ethical purchasing by drawing a connection between the labor process and the commodity from the perspective of the consumer.

b) Techniques of Appealing to the Physical Senses

But activists' built on these metaphorical sense perceptions and contemporary technologies to allow consumers to associate metaphorical images with specific commodities and to physically perceive the working conditions behind the commodity. Upon opening a copy of the Second Annual Report of the National Consumers' League (1900-1901), one finds an image of the League label, shaped like a bowtie, with the following phrase: "Goods bearing the above label are made in factories in which—The State factory law is obeyed; All the Goods are made on the premises; Overtime is not worked; Children under sixteen years of age are not employed."⁶² The use of a label, indirectly, exhibits one central way that NCL techniques rested upon physical and not only metaphorical senses. The label allowed the consumer to associate metaphorical images of the production process with particular commodities. This label was attached to articles of clothing, in particular, and encouraged an imaginative engagement with the commodity. Through a specific act of seeing a branded or labeled commodity, consumer activists sought to conjure up images of a clean, fair workplace in contrast with dirty, unjust ones. But I show that such physical techniques went beyond a reliance on physical perception to associate mental images of the workplaces with specific commodities; they often relied on the circulation of photographic documentation workplaces as well as public and private exhibitions of just and unjust goods. These physical techniques involved photography and methods of display such as exhibitions and lantern lectures. As with metaphorical techniques, physical ones were accompanied by a commitment to the ethical power of the senses.

⁶² *Second Annual Report 1900-1901*, inside front cover.

The NCL, CWS, and the Women’s Guild used labeling strategies to encourage ethical consumption. Such strategies remain bound closely with metaphorical ones as labels did not literally depict the workplaces where commodities were produced. For the NCL, the label was a tool for activating ethical senses. The League supplied approved factories with the label, which the manufacturers affixed to the goods—mostly clothing—in the factory. When the goods arrived at the shops, the label was already attached. Because the League did not operate their own stores, it was vital for them that the label remained attached to the goods in question. The label bridged the commodity and metaphorical perception of the labor process. When the label was stripped from the clothes, it undermined its purpose of uniting the good with the labor process. Members of the Consumers’ League of New York raised the issue that some stores were removing the League label *prior* to putting the goods out for sale and assuring concerned purchases that the goods were League-approved. A member wrote, “New York merchants frequently ‘hide their light under a bushel’ and though selling garments properly bearing our label frequently cut it off, or stow the clothes away in such quiet corners that customers are not aware of their presence.”⁶³ League members were concerned with the invisibility of the label, which suggests that actually seeing the label affixed to particular commodities mattered. It was a tool for activating ethical senses and inducing ethical purchasing.

The Co-operatives pursued a distinctive, but analogous attempt to label goods. Because the CWS were merchants, they could be relatively certain that co-operative goods bear the label.⁶⁴ One who saw the C.W.S. brand would be able to envision a clean, wholesome workplace where the employees were paid and treated well. Like the NCL, co-operators presented their

⁶³ “Committee on Label”, *The Work of the Consumers’ League of the City of New York*, 1915, pp. 35-36

⁶⁴ However, local wholesale societies were not required to stock goods exclusively produced in co-operative industries for co-operative stores. But reports of labeling issues analogous to the kind experienced by the Consumers’ Leagues are scant.

brand as a bridge between physical and metaphorical strategies to encourage ethical purchasing. As such, many co-operative advertisements took pains to show that the products were made under “the best conditions of labor.”⁶⁵ In co-operative publications, one can find in-depth descriptions of co-operative goods at various moments in the supply chain. An account of co-operative tea, for instance, began with the tea plantations and ended in the London factory where the tea was cured and packaged.⁶⁶ Such accounts included pictures of the workers and their environment. But it was not always easy to maintain the integrity of the co-operative brand and label. In 1906, when they discovered that sweated laborers in London were producing matchboxes with the Co-operative label, co-operators opined that the co-operatives claimed to produce “pure” goods, even if they were not able to “scent” out traces of sweating in every case.⁶⁷ The editors employed metaphorical terms to contrast the “scent of the sweater”, which was difficult to trace, with the case of the matchboxes, which had “come to light.” Thus the possibility of keeping the label pure rested upon the ability to uncover and see sweatshop conditions in a metaphorical sense. Co-operators relied on this metaphorical and physical sense to secure appropriate action, i.e. ethical purchasing. Provided that co-operators could preserve the integrity of the brand, actually seeing a co-operative label would allow consumers to imagine the pure and fair working conditions in contrast to the sweatshop. The label was a physical tool for associating the commodity with images of the labor process—metaphorical or physical. But labels did not provide their own images; they relied on others.

⁶⁵ This text comes from a 1916 advertisement for co-operative clothing, see *Co-operative News*, 1/22/1916, p. X. Advertisements for Co-operative products appear in many Co-operative publications, whether the national weekly, *Co-operative News*, local monthly papers published by individual co-operative societies, and co-operative journals such as the *Wheatsheaf*.

⁶⁶ The article spanned two issues of *The Manchester and Salford Monthly*: October 1908, Vol. XX, No. 239, pp. 206-210; November 1908, Vol. XX, No. 241, p. 228

⁶⁷ “The Taint of the Sweater”, Ed. *Co-operative News*, 05/26/06, p. 583.

Both groups relied on photography to allow consumers to see into the labor process. The NCL circulated published photographs of working conditions extensively. Between 1905 and 1914, the NCL Annual Reports included photographs of tenement working conditions that identified the goods produced there, from cigars and artificial flowers to clothing and bread.⁶⁸ The 1905-06 Annual Report included photographs of flower makers, home workers finishing garments in a New York tenement, workers in a New York garment sweatshop, pasta drying in a tenement hallway, a cake and cruller bakeshop in a tenement, a candy factory with an adjoining bedroom, an image of an overcrowded tenement house, a shack where berry pickers lived during the picking season, and cranberry pickers. Some League pamphlets consisted almost exclusively of photographs of workers and their working conditions.⁶⁹ In contrast with the NCL, co-operators used photographs to document virtuous, co-operative events rather than illuminate the obscure conditions of production.⁷⁰ But co-operatives did circulate images of co-operative productions in their publications. The aforementioned accounts of the co-operative supply chain were published in movement periodicals such as *The Wheatsheaf* and were reprinted in local co-operative publications. From bacon and cake flour to biscuits and tea, co-operators depicted the virtuous working conditions that attended the production of co-operative goods.⁷¹ In general, these techniques encouraged consumers to take in actual images of workplaces and associate them with specific commodities, thus encouraging ethical purchasing.

⁶⁸ *The NCL Annual Report, 1905-06*, pp. 4, 13, 24, 28, 36, 38, 40, 44, 45, 48, 49

⁶⁹ *Children Who Work in the Tenements*, The Consumers' League of the City of New York, March 1908; "Appendix VII", *What the United States Government says about Child Labor in Tenements*, New York Child Labor Committee, March 1911

⁷⁰ See, *The Manchester and Salford Monthly Herald*, October 1900, Vol. XII, No. 143.

⁷¹ "A 'Corner' in Biscuits", *Manchester and Salford Monthly Herald*, March 1908, Vol. XX, p. 47; "Bacon", *Manchester and Salford Monthly Herald*, May 1910, Vol. XXII, No. 257, p. 93; "C.W.S. Drug Works", *Manchester and Salford Monthly Herald*, Vol. XXII, No. 261, pp. 170-173.

The attempt to demystify commodities by means of ordinary perception is best exemplified in the various exhibitions circulated by these consumer activists. Each group relied on exhibitions of goods. These ranged from public, traveling exhibitions of sweated goods to local meetings where people were able to see, touch, and sometimes taste goods, while learning about their origins. Co-operative Reports are rife with instances of co-operative exhibitions.⁷² A member of the Oldham co-operative society described an 1894 exhibition as “an object lesson in co-operation.”⁷³ This meant that co-operative exhibitions of goods were a celebration of the ability of the working classes to produce high-quality, non-sweated goods. Participants could take these goods in and appreciate their working-class origins. Members of the Women’s Guild developed similar exhibitions of co-operative products for use at conferences throughout England: “Our idea is that the guild shall possess a box of goods which shall be sent round to the various towns where the conferences are held[.]”⁷⁴ It was also common for local Women’s Guild conferences to provide samples of co-operative goods, while also taking in lectures. Sometimes these events involved “lantern lectures”—lectures accompanied by photographs projected as slides—on the virtues of co-operation.⁷⁵ Explicit information about the content of the slides is difficult to come by, but it is clear that Guild members used these lantern slides to encourage ethical purchasing. Several reports of Women’s Guild events identify lantern lectures on

⁷² For instance, “On the Trail of the Sweater” described a conference with displays of sweating conditions in the chocolate, confectionary, trade biscuits, jellies, and pickle-making trades. “On the Trail of the Sweater”, *Co-operative News*, 03/14/1914 ; on the significance of exhibitions to the Co-operative movement, see Gurney, *Co-operative Culture*, pp. 79-80

⁷³ Cited in Gurney, *Co-operative Culture*, p. 80

⁷⁴ “The Annual Report of the WCG”, *Co-operative News*, 5/23/1891, p. 518

⁷⁵ I return to the issue of lantern lectures briefly in the conclusion. On lantern lectures and turn of the twentieth century humanitarianism, see Kevin Grant, *A Civilised Savagery: Britain and New Slavery in Africa, 1884-1926*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 39-78.

“Cocoa”, “Soap”, “Flour”, and a range of other goods.⁷⁶ These events paired photographic images and accounts of working conditions with demonstrations of co-operative goods; there the consumers could perceive the producer and commodity together.

The NCL engaged in analogous exhibitions of just and unjust goods. Exhibitions of labeled garments were such a common strategy that one member of the League wrote that “chronicling them would be a hopeless undertaking.”⁷⁷ These events involved displays of goods bearing the NCL label along with photographs of the factories from which these goods originated.⁷⁸ For major expositions such as the 1915 Panama-Pacific in San Francisco, the League used large screens or slides that depicted “unfavorable industrial conditions” and the League’s work to remedy those issues, including samples of goods made in tenements (See Figure 2).⁷⁹ In the years from 1914 to 1917, this exhibit visited 28 states. Other exhibits were available by request for smaller local groups. These comprised photographic replicas of the large screens, samples of tenement made goods, and slides of ideal working conditions.⁸⁰ In at least one instance, a Massachusetts garment factory hosted a lecture, exhibition of labeled goods, and a tour of the premises.⁸¹ The League also helped to construct exhibitions by other groups that addressed themes such as industrial conditions, urban congestion, public health, and more. Florence Kelley described the League’s contributions as “bringing out in every way the relation of the consumer to the conditions under which work is done.”⁸² Designed to “attract the attention of the passer-by”, these exhibitions built on ordinary perception in order to demystify the

⁷⁶ “Co-operative Production”, *Twenty-Seventh Annual Report of the Women’s Co-operative Guild*, May 1909-1910, pp. 12-13; “Bristol Society: Report of the Women’s Guild”, *Annual Co-operative Congress, 1906*, pp. 159-160; *Sixteenth Annual Report of the Co-operative Women’s Guild, April 1898-1899*, p. 5

⁷⁷ “A Factory Entertains a League”, *NCL Annual Report 1902-03*, p. 15.

⁷⁸ “Exhibits of Labeled Goods”, *NCL Annual Report 1901-02*, pp. 21-22

⁷⁹ “Report of the Committee on Exhibits”, *NCL Annual Report 1914-1917*, p. 46

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46

⁸¹ “A Factory Entertains a League”, *NCL Annual Report 1902-03*, pp. 15-16.

⁸² “Exhibitions”, *NCL Annual Report, 1906-07*, pp. 17-18

commodity and encourage ethical purchasing.⁸³ In addition, league members could also host private exhibitions in their homes, which encouraged the purchase of ethically-made goods.⁸⁴

By juxtaposing goods with images of their origins in ways that people could actually perceive, activists placed physical perception in the service of metaphorical techniques for reconstructing consumers' perceptions. They aimed to join the social processes of production and the commodity together for the consumer at the point of purchase. In the process, activists relied on the ethical power of the senses to bring this ethical consumer into being. By perceiving the obscure processes of production, consumers would be moved to seek out goods that were produced in desirable working conditions and avoid those produced in undesirable ones.

A Brief Comparison with Historical Predecessors

In order to appreciate the significance of turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists' sensory techniques, I situate them in relation to several historical predecessors. A brief account of the history of consumer activism will suggest the virtues of more elaborate comparisons of activists' sensory techniques. In this section, I focus on their most direct predecessors only: eighteenth- and nineteenth-century abolitionists in Great Britain and the United States. Also, it underscores one essential analytical point: to avoid falsely attributing the use of sensory techniques to commodity fetishism rather than generic social trends, one must demonstrate that activists use these techniques to draw connections between the labor process, the commodity, and the consumer. In so far as modern consumer activists do this, one can argue that they address commodity fetishism.

The abolitionists in England anticipated turn-of-the-twentieth-century activism in their attempt to establish long-distance solidarity with workers through purchasing.⁸⁵ For example, a

⁸³ "Sub-Committee on Exhibits", *The Consumers' League of the City of New York*, 1914, p. 26

⁸⁴ "Committee on Label", *The Work of the Consumers' League of the City of New York 1915*, p. 37.

1791 abolitionist pamphlet declared, “every person who habitually consumes one article of West Indian produce is guilty of the crime of murder[.]”⁸⁶ Just like later consumer activists, British abolitionists identified the consumer as causally and morally responsible for workers’ livelihoods. Furthermore, they sometimes sought to reconnect consumers and produces through the use of sensory techniques. Abolitionists’ made the rhetorical appeals that demonstrated the physical connection of the consumer of slave-grown sugar to the slaves themselves. The slaves’ blood and sweat polluted the sugar that British colonists purchased, both physically and metaphorically. By drawing this connection through striking imagery and appeals to the sympathy of the consumer, abolitionists addressed the practical inability of consumers to sense the labor involved in commodity production. But the techniques that British abolitionists employed were not just metaphorical. They also circulated photographs, paintings, and stylized images emblazoned on goods as a means of identifying with the abolitionist cause.⁸⁷

But while eighteenth and early nineteenth century British abolitionists developed an understanding of the consumer as powerful and responsible, they did not stress consumer’s universality. In addition, their sensory techniques were not so closely yoked to an obvious ethical duty to purchase non-slave made goods. Many British abolitionists insisted on abstention from

⁸⁵ A more thorough comparison must address the relationship between chattel slavery and capitalism, but such questions are beyond the scope of this article. While it is clear that chattel slavery contradicts a basic principle of capitalist societies—free labor—historians acknowledge that slave labor was essential to the development of capitalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially. The literature on abolitionists is vast and diffuse. For some notable works, see David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966); Thomas Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire’s Slaves*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005).

⁸⁶ Cited in Charlotte Sussman, *Consuming Anxieties: Consumer Protest, Gender, and British Slavery, 1713-1833*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 43

⁸⁷ For an account of the visual iconography of the anti-slavery movement, see Fuyuki Kurasawa, “The Long Shadow of History: The Paradoxes of Iconographic Reiteration in Anti-Slavery Advocacy”, *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, Vol. 2, 1 (2014); on the circulation of the abolitionist “brand” among the English middle classes, see Peter Stamatov, *The Origins of Global Humanitarianism: Religion, Empires, and Advocacy*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 159-160

the purchase and use of slave-produced sugar and rum. Furthermore, anti-slavery societies often pursued metaphorical efforts to demystify slave-produced commodities. Often they used poems and literature to render the images of suffering workers and attach them to specific commodities like rum and sugar. British women's Anti-Slavery Societies stressed reading about slave conditions as a means of encouraging political action.⁸⁸ As such, with the exception of the images of slavery, the sensory techniques used by early abolitionists remained metaphorical. Even these images were designed to evoke sympathy with the slave more than to perceive the conditions in which they toiled. With respect to consumers' universality, British abolitionists' moral appeals did not rest, ultimately, on the role of the consumer and the causal connection between consumer and producer. Rather, it referred to other social roles and identities. If the consumer was universal, it was only implicitly so; the abolitionists were not *consumer* activists.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, American free produce supporters put forth another robust understanding of consumer universality, power, and responsibility.⁸⁹ Some explicitly identified American slavery as a way to supply consumers with commodities—an explicit celebration of consumer power.⁹⁰ And their generic accounts of the consumer accentuated the universality of the consumer identity, even if these groups did not portray themselves as consumer activists. Furthermore, they employed sensory techniques intended to unite the labor process and commodity from the perspective of the consumer. Free produce advocates, many of them Quakers, opened stores dedicated to the sale of non-slave made goods. One supporter wrote the following about stores that sold slave-made goods: “Go to yonder store, and the products of oppression will stare you in the face. Look! And you will see the pro-slavery

⁸⁸ Sussman, pp. 130-147

⁸⁹ In this paragraph, I draw on Lawrence Glickman, *Buying Power*, pp. 61-89; Glickman is the only contemporary historian to address these American abolitionists as consumer activists.

⁹⁰ Glickman, pp. 73-76

pictures there exhibited.”⁹¹ While these stores were not filled with “pro-slavery pictures” in a literal sense, these free produce advocates sought to brand slave-made products by using sensory metaphors. In 1851, abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet stated, “The sugar with which we sweetened our tea, and the rice which we ate, were actually spread with the sweat of slaves, sprinkled with their tears, and fanned by their sighs.”⁹² Abolitionists employed such sensory metaphors in an attempt to facilitate an imaginative identification with the slave and to portray their working conditions to the consumers who were responsible for these evils.

But there are important distinctions to be drawn between turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists and mid-nineteenth century abolitionists. First, each of these abolitionist groups saw themselves not as consumer activists, but as abolitionists.⁹³ As Lawrence Glickman writes, “supporters of these causes [free produce , Sabbatarians, and Southern nonintercourse advocates] neither defined themselves as consumer activists, nor understood themselves to be fighting on behalf of consumers.”⁹⁴ For this reason, their understanding of the consumer as an identity or actor was more limited than later activists. They did not see themselves as consumer activists, but as anti-slavery advocates. Second, abolitionist groups focused exclusively on physically remote slaves, while much of the later activism included a substantial number of domestic but invisible workers. Furthermore, later activists addressed a wider range of labor practices, from tenement labor and sweatshops to forced overtime and employment of children. Third, predecessors’ sensory techniques were predominantly metaphorical. While they circulated

⁹¹ Cited in Glickman, p. 79

⁹² Cited in Glickman, *Buying Power*, p. 79

⁹³ On the evangelical character of this activism, see Robert Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Michael Young, *Bearing Witness Against Sin: The Evangelical Birth of the American Social Movement*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005)

⁹⁴ Glickman, *Buying Power*, p. 63

visual representations of slave conditions, they focused on the imagination as a means of securing ethical purchasing and limited their appeals to the physical senses.

Conclusion

As an attempt to respond to commodity fetishism in practical terms, turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists sought to demystify commodities. Further, they trusted in the ethical power of the senses to induce ethical purchasing. It is easy to see why. After all, the history of consumer activism tells us that many different groups have sought to illuminate the provenance of anonymous commodities. I have argued that commodity fetishism can explain activists' reliance on sensory techniques to salvage consumers' senses.

From the analysis above, we can distill several virtues of commodity fetishism for the study of consumer activism and consumption. First, it provides a basis for investigating comparative questions about the development of consumer activism. Marx's account of commodity fetishism describes a basic practical issue for consumers in a capitalist society: the commodity renders social relations of labor insensible from the perspective of consumers. For the purposes of comparison, we can posit that when consumer activists seek to remedy consumers' inability to perceive the conditions of a good's production, their techniques follow from this basic characteristic of the consumer. Scholars have made much of the transition away from labor-oriented (and "political") consumer activism that occurred over the course of the twentieth-century.⁹⁵ It would be worthwhile to examine how analogous sensory techniques for reconstructing consumers' perceptions persisted in consumer protection campaigns, green consumerism, the Fair Trade movement, and buy local campaigns throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first century. Furthermore, with the advent of information technologies, the

⁹⁵ Matthew Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth Century Britain*; Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Twentieth-Century America*, (New York: Vintage, 2004).

circulation of sights and sounds of the labor process has become more directly transmittable; they can even be encoded on product packaging itself. Presently, there are apps for smartphones such as ShopEthical that allow consumers to call up information about the labor process and companies that sponsor such goods. In general, these attempts focus not on sensory techniques but on accurate information about corporate practices, donations, and working conditions.⁹⁶ If such movements employ sensory techniques less explicitly, then comparisons will help us to clarify the significance of earlier attempts that relied on analogous techniques. We may find that consumer activists were more likely to engage commodity fetishism directly when it still appeared possible to demystify the labor process. In an era of increasingly elaborate supply chains, the optimistic desire to reconstruct consumers' sense perceptions may have given way to a more complete acceptance of the denigration of the senses. At the same time, attention to how and where such sensory techniques persist may provide a useful means of distinguishing between consumer activists—those that engage commodity fetishism directly and those that do not.

Second, commodity fetishism may indicate conflicts over the meaning of consumption. I have suggested that projects to encourage ethical purchasing, for instance, gain significance precisely because of the phenomenon of commodity fetishism. In this way, commodity fetishism can be a tool for exploring specific meanings that people attribute to their consumption and the conflicts over those meanings. Although Marx's description suggests that commodity fetishism is unchanging, we may be able to track significant shifts in the meaning of the phenomenon over time. If there are significant shifts in the style, character, and use of sensory techniques, we might also expect to find different understandings of the significance of commodity fetishism. As I suggested above, if consumer activists interpret commodity fetishism as a phenomenon to be

⁹⁶ Anthropologist Daniel Miller signals the sensory potential of information technologies in a proposal for consumer education. See *Consumption and its Consequences*, (New York: Polity, 2012), pp. 139-142

overcome by way of sensory techniques, this suggests that they perceive the mystification as partial or incomplete. By contrast, the turn away from such techniques may suggest that such mystifications appear insurmountable. As such, consumer activists' methods for dealing with (or not dealing with) commodity fetishism may indicate distinctive interpretations of the relations between the labor process, consumers, and commodities.

Once we develop a more comprehensive comparative account of consumer activists' reliance on sensory techniques, we will be better prepared to address broad causal questions about commodity fetishism and ethical purchasing projects. Is commodity fetishism sufficient to explain the techniques that activists' use to induce ethical purchasing across a range of periods and places? To what extent do these groups necessarily rely on sensory techniques in virtue of their focus on the consumer as an agent of social change? Such questions promise to clarify the concrete relations between capitalist methods of production and the forms that labor-based consumer activism has taken in the last three centuries. It will allow us to specify how the actions undertaken by consumer activists reflect and reshape their social and economic context.

Commodity fetishism may be sufficient to explain consumer activists' techniques and tactics as a whole, but it is insufficient to explain particular instances where non-consumer based activists employ similar techniques—especially in other forms of “long-distance advocacy”.⁹⁷ For instance, British missionaries John and Alice Harris, contemporaries of these consumer activists, employed lantern lectures to motivate the British public to address the atrocities in King Leopold's Congo Free State.⁹⁸ The lectures were accompanied by eye-catching images and information designed to captivate the audience, to great effect. In the case of the Congo Reform campaign, it would be false to claim that commodity fetishism has any direct relevance to their

⁹⁷ Peter Stamatov, *The Origins of Global Humanitarianism*, p. 1

⁹⁸ Grant, *A Civilised Savagery*, pp. 39-78

use of lantern lectures. While the Congo Reform campaign sought to induce the British public to care about the Congo in spite of their distance, consumer activists sought to collapse the distance between consumers and workers via the commodity form. This raises two relevant questions for future comparative research. Do sensory techniques and commitments to the ethical power of the senses vary with the problems that activists address? And are some sensory techniques more effective at inducing action than others? We might expect sensory techniques and commitments to vary if the problem to be solved relates to commodity fetishism as opposed to the problem of physical distance or ignorance. To answer such questions would require us to analyze the content of the images and their reception, not just their use as a technique in long-distance advocacy.⁹⁹

Ultimately, activists' direct engagement with commodity fetishism may have the ironic consequence of reinforcing the fetishism that they sought to surmount. By seeking to connect the commodity to the social relations of production through the consumer's perspective, they re-establish the commodity as the consumer's means of relating to the labor process and laborers. It was this very situation, where people relate to one another by means of a commodity, that Marx sought to capture in his discussion of commodity fetishism. Thus, activists' reliance on sensory techniques may help explain, more precisely, the limits of ethical purchasing schemes.¹⁰⁰ Even so, consumer activists' sought to reshape the meaning of consumption. They did so using techniques that expressed a sincere attempt to render the conditions of labor sensible to the purchaser of commodities. As such, my approach reveals the versatility of commodity fetishism as a phenomenological and historically-developing description of life in capitalist societies. We

⁹⁹ See Fuyuki Kurasawa, "The Long Shadow of History..." for an analysis of the shared iconography of anti-slavery movements in the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries, respectively.

¹⁰⁰ Jonathan Robins, "Slave Cocoa and Red Rubber: E.D. Morel and the Problem of Ethical Consumption." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 54(2012)

can draw upon it not to denounce the illusions of consumer activists, but to understand the form that such projects take as well as their significance.