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THE FEMALE CONSUMER AND THE POLITICS OF CONSUMPTION IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITAIN*

MATTHEW HILTON
University of Birmingham

ABSTRACT. *This article traces the history of women's participation in consumer politics and the gendering of the consumer in twentieth-century Britain. It does so by focusing on two important moments in the official discussion of the consumer interest: the Consumers' Council of the First World War and the Molony Committee on Consumer Protection, 1959–1962. It argues that notions of consumer-citizenship have been varied and forever in flux and that the involvement of women in consumer issues within the state apparatus has always been at once both disputed and encouraged. Within this complex history, however, a number of discernible trends are apparent. In the first half of the twentieth century, consumer issues were articulated by women's organizations on the political left and the consumer was considered largely a working-class housewife within official consumer politics. By mid-century, an increasingly dominant view of the consumer was that of the middle-class housewife, and a host of socially conservative women's groups came to speak for the consumer. By the 1950s, while the definition of the consumer remained contested, it had increasingly become a gender-neutral category, as business groups defined consumer interests in government committees and an emerging affluent consumer movement inscribed consumerism with the values of a male professional class.*

I

For centuries cultural commentators have written of the close relationship between women and consumption. Bernard Mandeville's contemporaries will have known exactly which sex was prone to commit the 'private vices' of his *Fable of the bees*. Thorstein Veblen recognized the role of women in the maintenance of social status through 'conspicuous consumption' in his *Theory of the leisure class*. And, in *The ladies' paradise*, Emile Zola's Octave Mouret was able to amass a fortune through an intimate knowledge of his female customers' secret desires.[1] Uncomfortably, the classical political economists acknowledged

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[1] B. Mandeville, *The fable of the bees, or private vices, public benefits* (1714; New York, 1962); T. Veblen, *The theory of the leisure class* (1899; Harmondsworth, 1979); E. Zola, *The ladies' paradise [Au bonheur des dames]*, trans. B. Nelson (Oxford, 1998).

that this irrational expenditure did fuel production and hence wealth and the national economy. But other notions of the relationship between women and consumption have also existed and by the turn of the twentieth century, it was being imagined as an oppositional force in politics and the economy. Most radically, in *The consumer in revolt* (1912), the militant British feminist, Teresa Billington-Greig, provided a highly gendered understanding of capitalism and the separation of the private and public spheres. Industrialization, she argued, took away many aspects of women's production in the home and placed them in the factory and the world of men. Consequently, women's domestic work came to be undervalued and even held in 'contempt' as 'man' and 'producer' became synonymous.[2] Such gendered divisions of labour fed directly into the male control of the public sphere:

> Public affairs have come to be the realm of man because man regarded himself as the breadwinner, the producer of wealth of the world; and public affairs naturally are now entirely dominated by the producer's point of view. Our politics are the politics of production … Capitalistic industry, that with its tongue in its cheek talks of the need of the consumer, is mainly concerned with making production useful to the small class that controls it.[3]

This economic and political division created a psychological split too. Woman, as the 'national purchaser', thought in terms of prices as opposed to wages, more interested in the economics of consumption than production. That she had not utilized this consciousness to protest against adulteration, underselling, and shoddy goods was due to the 'segregation of women, each shut apart in her own home'. With appropriate education and training, women would realize their potential and end their 'exclusion from public life'. Billington-Greig urged a feminist liberation through the politics of consumption:

> It would … seem that a very heavy price has been exacted from humanity for the sex-subjection of women and the economic divorce which it has occasioned. Woman the consumer has been revenged for the degradation of woman the creature of sex. And it follows that the economic re-organisation of the world can only come when woman is active and free.[4]

The consumer in revolt is of interest because of the way it prefigures many of the debates about women, consumption, and politics that currently concern historians of consumer society, especially her advocacy of a greater role for women in public office. From Billington-Greig's life we can surmise that what she considered to be a public sphere was not too distant from that which has been outlined by Habermas.[5] She was committed to reason, logic, and

[2] T. Billington-Greig, *The consumer in revolt* (London, 1912), p. 19. [3] Ibid., p. 57.
[4] Ibid., p. 61.
[5] J. Habermas, *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*, trans. T. Burger (Oxford, 1992).

independent debate and it is this intellectual freedom which caused her to split with the Pankhursts' Women's Social and Political Union in 1907, which she found too autocratic and restrictive.[6] Her own Women's Freedom League was established to encourage the kind of rational-critical and democratic discourse usually, if controversially, associated with the (admittedly male) public sphere of the late eighteenth century. In Habermas's narrative, consumption has little or no role in the idealized public sphere and, indeed, is said to have to led to its 'structural transformation' from the late nineteenth century as the growing importance of private consumption eclipsed the role of public political debate.[7] Consumption here fits into rather conventional conceptual dichotomies as it is associated with the domestic and the feminine in opposition to production, the public, and the masculine.[8] But Billington-Greig's call for a feminine public sphere of consumption mirrors much recent historical investigations of the marketplace which explore the range of interactions between women consumers and political issues (variously understood). This suggests the invocation of consumption as a 'subaltern counterpublic' where women's practical roles as consumers have forced redefinitions of political discourse and the constitution of the 'public'.[9] Nancy Fraser has pointed to the 'counter civil society' created through women-only voluntary and philanthropic associations in the nineteenth century.[10] Billington-Greig aimed to add consumption to the arenas around which women could organize themselves politically, though she clearly did not mean what one historian has suggested might be called the 'ersatz public domains' of the shop and the department store.[11] More likely, Billington-Greig was referring to overtly politicized consumption: the international boycotts of non-trade union goods at the turn of the twentieth century; the US women co-operators' support for their husbands' labour activities; the involvement of black American women in 'Don't Buy Where You Can't Work' campaigns; and the involvement of women such as Rachel Carson in inspiring modern consumer movements and action.[12]

[6] B. Harrison, *Prudent revolutionaries: portraits of British feminists between the wars* (Oxford, 1987), p. 50.

[7] For useful introductions, see C. Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the public sphere* (London, 1992), pp. 1–48; J. Breuilly, 'Civil society and the public sphere in Hamburg, Lyon and Manchester, 1815–1850', in H. Koopman and M. Lauster, eds., *Vormärzliteratur in europäischer perspektiv I* (Bielefeld, 1996), pp. 15–39.

[8] For the best account of these developments see the introductory essays by de Grazia in V. de Grazia and E. Furlough, eds., *The sex of things: gender and consumption in historical perspective* (London, 1996).

[9] The phrase 'subaltern counterpublic' has been borrowed from N. Fraser, 'Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy', *Social Text*, 25/6 (1990), pp. 56–80.

[10] N. Fraser, 'Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy', in Calhoun, ed., *Habermas*, pp. 109–42.

[11] L. Tiersten, 'Redefining consumer culture: recent literature on consumption and the bourgeoisie in western Europe', *Radical History Review*, 57 (1993), p. 139.

[12] For some good examples of this type of research and for the most up-to-date bibliographies see S. Strasser, C. McGovern, and M. Judt, eds., *Getting and spending: European and American consumer*

But Billington-Greig's advocacy of independent debate limited her involvement in feminist politics after 1907 as she was unwilling to compromise her ideals in the cause of short-term political action. This tension, between the creation of an idealized female consumer counterpublic and the compromises involved in active political participation within existing party or state structures, manifests itself in *Women in revolt*. She set out no grand plan of consumer action, advocated no specific policy measures, and aligned herself with no new consumer movement or organization of women. She was not attached to the Co-operative Union or the Women's Co-operative Guild where her views might have found much sympathy with figures such as Margaret Llewelyn Davies. She had withdrawn from an active role in the suffragette campaign and she was unwilling to participate in any women's group that had concerned itself with the politics of consumption, not the Consumers' League, nor the Women's Industrial Council, nor the Christian Social Union, nor the National Women's Council of the British Socialist Party.[13] In a theoretical sense, then, she spoke for all consumers and for all women, but her advocacy of an ideal political sphere of independent rational debate meant that her notion of the public sphere gave little practical guidelines for those already organized consumers – where a female counterpublic of consumption was most likely to exist, if at all – who were involved in the fight to get women's consumer issues into mainstream politics and women representatives on government-created official bodies. As perhaps with all calls for the mobilization of the consumer interest, the consumer becomes everybody and yet, at the same time, nobody.

This article explores the extent to which these tensions in Billington-Greig's politics have been lived out by women consumers in twentieth-century Britain. It does so by examining the consumer politics that were discussed in 'official' organizations; that is, those arenas made up of the interactions of women and other consumers when they were called upon to represent the wider consuming public within the formal channels of the state apparatus. The article thus focuses on several inter-related aspects: the involvement of women in the creation of any discernible consumer politics; the involvement of women as representatives of the consumer within various state bodies; and the gendering of the consumer interest by women and other groups within these official settings. What is clear is that the meanings of terms such as the consumer interest, consumer-citizenship and the politics of consumption are always in flux, as is the extent to which the consumer interest is aligned with any gender- or class-based interest. This is not to say, however, that a number of

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societies in the twentieth century (Cambridge, 1998), and L. B. Glickman, ed., *Consumer society in American history: a reader* (Ithaca, 1999).

[13] Billington-Greig, *Consumer in revolt*, p. 91. On the details of Billington-Greig's life and the reception of *The consumer in revolt*, see Harrison, *Prudent revolutionaries*, ch. 2, 'Woman of ideas: Teresa Billington-Greig', pp. 45–72; E. Crawford, *The women's suffrage movement: a reference guide, 1866–1928* (London, 1999), entry for Teresa Billington-Greig, pp. 54–6.

significant trends are not discernible and which can be highlighted by giving special attention to two key moments in the history of gender and the politics of consumption: the Consumers' Council of the First World War and the Molony Committee on Consumer Protection which reported in 1962.

In the Consumers' Council of 1918–1920 there was an official recognition of the consumer interest. Although women representatives on the Council were outnumbered by male representatives of the labour movement, an underlying assumption persisted that the consumer was both working class and female and, as such, had a number of specific interests that needed defending, as well as a number of general concerns that mirrored the interests of organized labour. By the end of the Second World War, it was largely middle-class women's voluntary groups that spoke for the consumer within official channels as working-class groups were marginalized in state consumer politics. Here, gender assumptions about the consumer remained, though the consumer interest was argued to be best defended by policies supporting rather than attacking the market. A further development in the 1950s saw the consumer, to an extent, change sex, as a particular politics of consumption was articulated that legitimated the middle-class male's entry into the consumer field. The reasons for such a change in the gendered constitution of the consumer are twofold. First, there was a deliberate attempt on the part of dominant producer interests within various governments to shape and direct the consumer interest. The hegemony of the rational individual model of consumption was maintained through the exclusion of radical working-class voices and the incorporation of consumers whose loyalties and beliefs were more closely aligned with those of privately organized commerce.[14] Secondly, the affluence of the 1950s gave rise to a new consumer movement concerned more with the value-for-money of goods regarded as luxuries or 'comforts' (cars, refrigerators, stereos, furnishings, and other new mass produced consumer durables[15]) than with the rights to consume through collective provision goods classified as necessities. In this new consumer politics, gender distinctions were considered less important than the virtues of rationality and discrimination in individual purchasing decisions, and an expanding group of professional men posited themselves as the spokesmen of the affluent consumer.

[14] On the relationship between hegemony and the public sphere see G. Eley, 'Nations, publics and political cultures: placing Habermas in the nineteenth century', in Calhoun, ed., *Habermas*, pp. 289–339.

[15] On semi-luxuries see M. Berg, 'New commodities, luxuries and their consumers in eighteenth-century England', in M. Berg and H. Clifford, eds., *Consumers and luxury: consumer culture in Europe, 1650–1850* (Manchester, 1999), pp. 63–85. On 'comforts' see A. Marshall, *Principles of economics* (1890; London, 1961), p. 67.

II

There is a long tradition of women's politicization of consumption in Britain. In the eighteenth century plebeian women participated in the protests over prices, measures, and supply systems in the struggle for a 'moral economy'.[16] For middle-class women, consumption became a site through which political action could be taken against slavery. Women purchased brooches, cameos, snuff boxes, crockery, cushion covers, fire screens, and fly leaves, each bearing the legend, 'Am I not a man and a brother.' When these trinkets were dismissed as the fashionable whims of sentimental women, female consumers turned to abstinence rather than purchasing, boycotting sugar as the blood-stained produce of the slave trade.[17] In the nineteenth century, political agency was obtained for women through consumption in the bazaars of the Anti-Corn Law League, through discriminating purchasing policies during election campaigns, and in the exclusive dealing campaigns of the Chartist women who put pressure on shopkeepers to vote for radical candidates.[18] As Mary Savage of the Nottingham Female Political Union put it in 1838: 'no persons are so well qualified to bring these very important personages to their senses as the women of England upon whose minds we would impress as a public duty the necessity of expending their money only with the people or shopkeepers friendly to the cause of freedom, justice, Universal Suffrage etc'.[19] The politics of consumption have been worked out through the particular and the everyday. Glasgow tenants went on a rent strike in 1915 and in 1904 East End Jewish housewives forced bakers to sell bread made by a recognized trade union.[20] Margot Finn has shown how gender relations were negotiated around consumption in the county courts throughout the nineteenth century. Coverture removed the ability of the wife to act as an independent legal

[16] E. P. Thompson, 'The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century', *Past and Present*, 50 (1971), pp. 76–136, and idem, *Customs in common* (London, 1991). For the most recent discussions of the 'moral economy' see A. J. Randall and A. Charlesworth, eds., *Markets, market culture and popular protest in eighteenth-century Britain and Ireland* (Liverpool, 1996), and A. Randall and A. Charlesworth, eds., *The moral economy and popular protest: crowds, conflict and authority* (Basingstoke, 1999).

[17] K. Davies, 'A moral purchase: femininity, commerce, abolition, 1788–1792', in E. Eger and C. Grant, eds., *Women and the public sphere: writing and representation, 1660–1800* (Cambridge, 2000); C. Midgley, *Women against slavery: the British campaigns, 1780–1870* (London, 1992); C. Sussmann, 'Women and the politics of sugar, 1792', *Representations*, 48 (1994), pp. 48–69; D. Coleman, 'Conspicuous consumption: white abolitionism and English women's protest writing in the 1790s', *English Literary History*, 61 (1994), pp. 341–62; E. J. Yeo, 'Introduction: some paradoxes of empowerment', in E. J. Yeo, ed., *Radical femininity: women's self-representation in the public sphere* (Manchester, 1998), p. 2.

[18] P. A. Pickering and A. Tyrell, *The people's bread: a history of the Anti-Corn Law League* (London, 2000); D. Thompson, *The Chartists* (London, 1984), p. 137; L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family fortunes: men and women of the English middle class, 1780–1850* (London, 1987), p. 448; J. Vernon, *Politics and the people: a study in English political culture, c. 1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 378; A. Clark, *The struggle for the breeches: gender and the making of the British working class* (Berkeley, 1995), p. 228.

[19] Quoted in Thompson, *Chartists*, p. 137.

[20] M. van der Linden, 'Working-class consumer power', *International Labour and Working-Class History*, 46 (1994), pp. 109–21.

economic agent, her property passing to that of her husband. Debts that women might run up among local stores were thus the legal responsibility of the husband. Women, being able to represent themselves in the small claims courts, were able to manipulate judges' attitudes towards the domestic economy. If they could argue that a debt emerged out of the provisioning of 'necessaries', then they could use this legal obligation of the husband to settle the amount as a means of financial negotiation within an unhappy marriage. Alternatively, if the debts were held to be the consequence of luxuriant spending, the husband was no longer held responsible, while the wife, as an economic legal nonentity, was under no obligation to pay either, much to the irritation of the local trader.[21] Such negotiations of gender and consumption continue today. Women's skills as consumers are now being valued in the labour market, creating new job opportunities for women in the fields of the creative and consultancy professions.[22]

What marks the period around the turn of the twentieth century is the number of bodies that were articulating a range of consumer politics for women. The organization that provided the most persistent outlet for working-class women's voices as consumers was the Co-operative Union. Although the co-operative movement had been traditionally run by men, in 1883 the Women's Co-operative Guild (WCG) was set up which allowed women to develop an early feminist consciousness.[23] Leaders such as Margaret Llewelyn Davies spoke out on issues concerning maternity benefits, birth control, and divorce law reform.[24] As Gillian Scott has argued, by 1914 guildswomen 'took it for granted that they could and should intervene in public debates on any and every subject and, if necessary, criticise officials, institutions or politicians who were responsible for unjust and discriminatory policies'.[25] And the WCG was not alone in this wider politicization of consumption. In the 1880s, the trade unionist Clementina Black helped to

[21] M. Finn, 'Women, consumption and coverture in England, c. 1760–1860', *Historical Journal*, 39 (1996), pp. 703–22. See also M. Finn, 'Working-class women and the contest for consumer control in Victorian county courts', *Past and Present*, 161 (1998), pp. 116–54; E. Rappaport, '"A husband and his wife's dresses": consumer credit and the debtor family in England, 1864–1914', in de Grazia and Furlough, eds., *The sex of things*, pp. 163–87; R. J. Morris, 'Men, women, and property: the reform of the Married Women's Property Act 1870', in F. M. L. Thompson, ed., *Landowners, capitalists and entrepreneurs: essays for Sir John Habakkuk* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 171–91.

[22] A. Gray, 'Jobs for the girls: women, consumption and the enterprising self', paper presented to Cultural Studies and Sociology Seminar, University of Birmingham, November 1999.

[23] For the co-operative movement generally see P. Gurney, *Co-operative culture and the politics of consumption in England, c. 1870–1930* (Manchester, 1996). Internationally, see E. Furlough and C. Strikwerda, eds., *Consumers against capitalism? Consumer co-operation in Europe, North America and Japan, 1840–1990* (Oxford, 1999).

[24] G. Scott, *Feminism and the politics of working women: the Women's Co-operative Guild, 1880s to the Second World War* (London, 1998); C. Webb, *The woman with the basket: the history of the Women's Co-operative Guild* (Manchester, 1927); M. L. Davies, *Women as organised consumers* (Manchester, 1921); idem, *Guild work in relation to educational committees of co-operative societies* (London, 1898).

[25] G. Scott, '"As a war-horse to the beat of drums": representations of working-class femininity in the Women's Co-operative Guild, 1880s to the Second World War', in Yeo, ed., *Radical femininity*, p. 199.

organize a Consumers' League which spoke of the duties of consumers to boycott those firms in the sweating trades who did not pay a 'fair wage'.[26] Although the idea never really took off in Britain, it was taken up in America and in 1898 the National Consumers' League set up the White Label Campaign, followed in 1902 in France and Germany with the *Ligue Social d'Acheteurs* and the *Käuferbund Deutschland*. Other consumer movements appeared in Holland and Italy while in Berne, the Swiss League, concerned with the activities of the chocolate manufacturers, set up in 1904 a *type de la bonne fabrique*, with which the employers had to apply to obtain admission to *la list blanche*.[27] Later, as Karen Hunt has recently demonstrated, in the period immediately prior to the First World War, socialist women attempted to develop a socialist consumer politics. In particular, Margaret Hicks and other women of the British Socialist Party began to focus women's activities on the cost of living, creating, in the words of the *Daily Herald*, a 'trade union of housewives'. Hicks argued that women were the 'chancellors of the exchequers' of the domestic economy and that everyday life could be the basis of political action for women:

> We must take up the petty worries of their lives, and show how even the haggling to get the best value for every penny is not mean, but is part of the great fight to get the best conditions of living. In combination with other women, it is this same spirit of sharp economy that will watch over the welfare of the whole working class. The greatest need of the present moment is to enlarge the outlook of working women from the individual to the social point of view.[28]

Hunt argues that socialist women's concerns were later eclipsed by the concerns of the male labour movement but there is sufficient evidence to suggest that Billington-Greig's *Consumers in revolt* – if not a manifesto of an organized movement – was at least one articulation of a growing consciousness about consumption and domestic life. In one sense, this should come as no surprise since matters of consumption had dominated politics throughout the nineteenth century. Frank Trentmann has stressed the centrality of the 'cheap loaf' to political thought and, by the Edwardian period, party political propaganda constantly used bread and other daily provisions as powerful visual symbols of the free trade versus protection debates.[29]

Ideas about consumer-citizenship and consumer politics varied from one

[26] *Consumers' League prospectus* (London, 1887?).

[27] Greig, *Consumer in revolt*, p. 93; K. K. Sklar, 'The consumer's White Label Campaign of the National Consumer's League, 1898–1918', in Strasser et al., eds., *Getting and spending*, pp. 17–35; W. Breckman, 'Disciplining consumption: the debate on luxury in Wilhelmine Germany, 1890–1914', *Journal of Social History*, 24 (1991), pp. 485–505.

[28] K. Hunt, *Socialist women* (forthcoming); K. Hunt, 'Negotiating the boundaries of the domestic: British socialist women and the politics of consumption', *Women's History Review*, 9 (2000), pp. 389–410.

[29] F. Trentmann, 'Bread, milk and democracy: consumption and citizenship in Britain, c. 1903–1951', in M. Hilton and M. Daunton, eds., *The politics of consumption: material culture and citizenship in Europe and America* (Oxford, 2001).

organization to another. For Hicks, consumption was about the basic standard of living and women using their experiences of provisioning in the fight for the overthrow of capitalism. For the WCG, female consumers were urged to shop in support of the co-operative commonwealth, though the organization could also educate women to speak for themselves on a whole range of other issues. And for the Consumers' League, politicized consumption meant individual action by women of all classes to shop in support of better conditions for workers. The First World War, however, focused consumer issues on to questions of profiteering and the provision of basic necessities following the world shortage in food supplies in 1917 which de-stabilized many countries' social and political structures. Recent studies have demonstrated the central role women played in food riots in Melbourne and New York, though it was in Berlin that women consumers obtained greatest political legitimacy.[30] Belinda Davis has shown that the effectiveness of the food blockade well before 1917 led to popular calls being made for the German government to assume a greater control over food supply and distribution. Shocked at the activities of 'women of lesser means' on the streets of the capital and other cities, officials had to respond to their demands for a food dictatorship: 'By the spring of 1915 the sympathetic perception of the woman of lesser means lent legitimacy to far-reaching demands both for heavy market intervention and for broad welfare provisions.'[31] The failure of the government to deal effectively with a far worse food shortage later in the war only increased the sympathy for poor women consumers who would soon de-stabilize the state even further.

The situation in Britain was not that dissimilar, especially after the commencement of the German submarine blockade and the perceived failure of the free market to cope with the ensuing crisis. Officials, noting the situation in Russia and the Home Office reports identifying profiteering and the food supply as the major spurs to industrial unrest throughout the country, sought a deliberate act of political containment. The Consumers' Council, an advisory body created within the Ministry of Food (established 1916), was set up towards the end of the war and it is clear that it was created mainly to channel popular anger over food issues into the official corridors of power rather than on the streets or through the War Emergency: Workers' National Committee, where it might have damaged national morale.[32] The Council's purpose was to

[30] On food disturbances in other national contexts see B. J. Davis, *Home fires burning: food, politics and everyday life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill, 2000); D. Frank, 'Housewives, socialists, and the politics of food: the 1917 New York cost-of-living protests', *Feminist Studies*, 11 (1985), pp. 255–85; J. Smart, 'Feminists, food and the fair price: the cost of living demonstrations in Melbourne, August–September 1917', *Labour History*, 50 (1986), pp. 113–31.

[31] Davis, *Home fires*, p. 48.

[32] On the general background to the Consumers' Council and the Ministry of Food see W. H. Beveridge, *British food control* (London, 1928); H. W. Clemesha, *Food control in the North-West Division* (Manchester, 1922); A. J. Philip, *Rations, rationing, and food control* (London, 1918); L. M. Barnett, *British food policy during the First World War* (London, 1985); F. Coller, *A state trading adventure* (Oxford, 1925). On the Workers' Emergency Committee see J. M. Winter, *Socialism and the challenge of war: ideas and politics in Britain, 1912–1918* (London, 1974), ch. 7; B. Waites, 'The

report on issues of working-class consumption to the Food Controller, Lord Rhondda. Specifically, Rhondda sought to enlist 'the co-operation of the organised working classes and the co-operative movement in the gigantic task which lay before the [Food] Ministry'.[33] Topics on which the Council advised the Ministry included the price, distribution, and quality of common household staples (mainly bread, milk, and meat), the effectiveness of rationing schemes, and the means by which food was sold and to whom. The Council may well have been the product of a measure to dissolve political tension but it nevertheless became the central focus for the articulation of a radical consumer consciousness. Some detailed analysis of its constitution, membership, and operations is therefore necessary.

The initial membership of the Council consisted of the Food Controller (Lord Rhondda was later succeeded by G. H. Roberts, MP), three representatives of the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Unions Congress, three representatives of the War Emergency: Workers' National Committee (including the veteran labour leader, H. M. Hyndman who played a dominant role in the committees), six (male) members of the Parliamentary Committee of the Co-operative Congress, three representatives of the Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organizations (M. E. Cottrell, Marion Phillips, and A. E. Reeves), plus three additional members who acted as the 'representatives of the unorganized consumer' (intriguingly these were the Countess of Selborne, Lord Rathcreedan and Professor Sir William Ashley, first professor of business studies at Birmingham University). Although only three organized women served on the Council, they were prominent voices throughout the meetings as well as in the various sub-committees. Women's issues were constantly discussed, especially since the needs of the housewife consumer were aired through the local Food Control Committees, set up in every major town and region throughout the country. Tables 1 and 2 show how nearly 18 per cent of members of the Food Control Committees came from organized working-class women's groups. The secretary of the Consumers' Council calculated that an average committee consisted of 11.9 members, 2.12 of whom were organized women. This figure does not take into account the 154 other women who were counted as Labour or Co-operative representatives, nor the unorganized women who are hidden in the column, 'Other members', and those serving on the Food Control Committee through their position as the direct representatives of the Committee's Appointing Authority. There appears

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government of the Home Front and the "moral economy" of the working class', in P. H. Liddle, ed., *Home fires and foreign fields: British social and military experience in the First World War* (London, 1985); War Emergency: Workers' National Committee, *Report, August 1914 to March 1916* (London, 1916).

[33] Consumers' Council archive, Marion Phillips papers, Manchester Labour History Archive (hereafter CC) CP 94/3: *Report on the constitution and work of the Consumers' Council*, pp. 1–2. Many of the papers of the Consumers' Council held in the Public Record Office have been destroyed by fire, but the papers of Marion Phillips, a member of the Council, provide a reasonable level of detail on the Council's activities.

Table 1: *Membership of Food Control Committees*

Area	No. of Committees	Total members[a]	Appointing authority members	Labour members	Women members	Co-operative members	Food trade members	Farmers	Other members
England	1,141	13,316	7,434	3,360	2,422	768	1,420	1,148	5,658
Wales	162	2,067	1,108	526	351	94	240	208	726
Scotland	87	1,169	572	255	176	90	162	44	489
TOTAL	1,390[b]	16,552	9,114	4,141	2,949	952	1,822	1,400	6,873

[a]The figures in this column are not the total of the figures in the columns to the right, due to some duplication of categories.

[b]There were a further 449 Committees, the figures for which were not included in this table since no statistics were returned by their Local Authorities.

Source: Consumers' Council archive, Marion Phillips papers, Manchester Labour History Archive: CC CP 3/7: Statistics of Membership of Food Control Committee, 6 January, 1919.

Table 2. *Percentages of total membership*

Labour	25·02%
Women	17·81%
Co-operative	5·78%
Other	51·39%

Source: see Table 1.

to have been a concerted effort to capture the consuming interests of women and the working class which the chairman of the Food Control Committee, J. R. Clynes, thought did 'much to secure that general confidence of the public upon which the successful working of the Committees as largely depends'.[34]

The women representatives, Cottrell, Phillips, and Reeves, were three of the most active members of the Council. They served on various sub-committees of the divisions of the Ministry of Food, ensuring that the consumers' voice was heard in discussions of national provisioning, the profiteering acts, restaurant prices, and the establishment of national kitchens. They made sure that objections were raised to the 'exclusion of practically all working women and adolescent girls from supplementary meat rations' and insisted that women who undertook the same work as men ought to be treated in the same way.[35] Milk maintained a position of importance throughout, since the role of the mother in raising her children was combined with patriotic worries about the health of the coming generation. And Reeves in particular ensured that the woman's voice was expressed in sub-committees on the price and rationing of everyday staple products.[36] More generally, though, the women contributed to a consumer critique of capitalism. The Consumers' Council increased in confidence and scope each month of its existence, so that it proposed an enormously expanded and far more interventionist role for the state, including the collectivization of agriculture, the state regulation of distribution, and the introduction of permanent controls against profiteering and the abuses it encouraged (short weight, adulteration, the use of heavy wrapping paper, the misrepresentation of goods, and 'other forms of profiteering fraud').[37] Two days after the Armistice, it urged the Allied Governments to 'recognise the necessity of providing food for the people of the late enemy countries'.[38] It called for an international agreement on the supply of food to ensure the efficient distribution of consumer goods in times of peace as well as war. It proposed the introduction of rationing whenever price rises threatened the interests of 'the mass of the people' and it insisted that the consumer be given

[34] CC CP 3/5: letter from J. R. Clynes, Chairman of the Food Control Committee, to Lord Rhondda, Chairman of the Consumers' Council, 3 Oct. 1918.
[35] CC CP 94/3: *Report on the constitution and work of the Consumers' Council*, p. 6.
[36] Ibid., pp. 20–1.
[37] CC CP 31/2/5: *Notes by Mr Uthwatt: Profiteering Act 1919*, 3 Nov. 1919.
[38] CC CP 94/3, p. 9.

the full rights of citizenship within the apparatus of the state: 'it is absolutely necessary that no question of general policy should be decided upon [by the Ministry of Food], and no definite action taken, until all relevant facts are placed before the Consumers' Council and their views ascertained'.[39] It thus sought to make itself the main channel for the expression of the consumer interest rather than through business-dominated organizations such as the Fair Trading Council.[40]

Most radical of all was the wide-ranging Reforms Sub-Committee appointed on 20 November 1918, which attempted to extend the work of the war-time advisory Council and Ministry of Food into permanent institutions. The Sub-Committee proposed the retention of war-time trade and food controls, especially fixed prices, and proposed that the state acquire a monopoly in the importation of foodstuffs, all to 'secure the rights of the consumers'.[41] The 'interests' of the consumer came to be articulated as those of the 'public', distinct from those of business or the retailer, and a belligerent and hostile language was adopted against the 'profiteers'.[42] It advocated the creation of a Ministry of Supply, purely for the 'protection of the consumer', and argued that if only the government would consider the consumer's point of view, 'rather than … the trade interest's point of view', then it would soon support the international regulation of supply, distribution and pricing; in short, the end of the capitalist organization of the economy: 'it is upon this basis alone that the future can be safeguarded, and the people of all communities be protected against the evils of extreme scarcity and an enormous increase in the cost of living'.[43]

Women's interests were a central pillar of this early discussion of the consumer interest. Consumer poverty, and particularly the conditions arising out of food control during the war, lent issues of supply and distribution an immediacy which gave equal importance to prices as well as to wages. Given the assumptions about the gendered nature of the household economy which pervaded working-class as well as middle-class culture, it was clear that issues of consumption could only be understood if women were given a public voice. The consumer politics of the First World War were based around a critique of 'profiteering', a notion of consumers as 'the mass of the people' where women's roles as family provisioners were inextricably bound up with the concerns of the entire labour movement.[44] While this entry into the official channels of politics

[39] Ibid., p. 10. [40] CC CP 289: *Report of the work of the Consumers' Council*, p. 6.

[41] CC CP 94/3: *Appendix A: Report of Sub-Committee on Reforms appointed by the Consumers' Council on 28 January 1919*, p. 23. See also CC CP 289, p. 21.

[42] The growing division between the consumer and trader interest can be seen in CC CP 47: *Letter from Birmingham and Midland Counties' Grocers' Protection and Benevolent Association*, 13 Nov. 1919.

[43] CC CP 94/3: *Appendix C: Report of the Sub-Committee on Reforms, 28 May, 1919*, p. 29. However, the co-operative members of the Council differed from their labour movement colleagues, favouring a return to free trade instead: CC CP 83/1: *Memorandum as to the position of the Ministry of Food and the Consumers' Council*, 5 Jan. 1920. See also Trentmann, 'Bread, milk and democracy'.

[44] CC CP 126/2: *Consumers' Council Conference, 19th February 1920: report of the proceedings*, p. 3.

and administration through the Food Control Committees and the Consumers' Council was by no means according to an overtly feminist agenda such as that observed within earlier Owenite communities,[45] women were certainly participating in, and women's issues were central to, this formulation of working-class radicalism. Council members recognized that the 'working-class household' was the site of political action for both 'the labour movement and consumers' which suggested an equality of need for male and female munitions workers and 'nursing mothers and children'.[46] The notion of the consumer was not that of a specifically female interest as Billington-Greig would have had it. Rather the concerns of the working-class housewife were now allied to those of the entire labour movement, and leaders such as Hyndman often preferred to substitute the conventional 'she' when referring to the consumer with a gender neutral category. To some extent, then, the specific issues of women consumers highlighted by Billington-Greig or members of the Women's Co-operative Guild may have become submerged within a wider working-class consumer radicalism, but more likely the women of the Consumers' Council were content to support something of a union between the purse and the pay packet. If there was a counterpublic of consumption in which the consumer was female in the rhetoric of the WCG and the British Socialist Party, when these interests were articulated in a state institutional setting, the specific concerns of the housewife – although implicitly and often explicitly recognized – were understood as a class interest.

All this does not mean that the Council was able to break down the political and economic orthodoxy that governments should adopt a laissez-faire attitude to consumption in peacetime conditions. It is significant that at the Consumers' Council conference in February 1920, the Labour MP Jack Jones commented on the indifference of politicians to consumer issues: 'We know of laughs that have gone up in the House of Commons when we have put questions as to prices. Any question of limiting the power of profiteers is looked upon as outside the domain of politics.'[47] Furthermore, the Consumers' Council was only ever constituted as an advisory body – it was never intended to have any executive or legislative powers. In the months after the war, when the dominant mood in Whitehall was that of a desire to return to peacetime conditions, the opinions of the Council were increasingly ignored by the relevant Ministries. Frustrated at the indifference and 'apathy' which many of its proposals met, especially in regard to the bread subsidy, Fair Trading Councils, national kitchens, the co-ordination of the milk industry, the use of standards for weights and quality, and the need for a permanent consumer body, the Council was left with no choice but to resign.[48] With much bitterness, its members met for the last time

[45] B. Taylor, *Eve and the new Jerusalem: socialism and feminism in the nineteenth century* (London, 1983). For a response to Taylor arguing that women could still play an important role within popular radicalism, despite the absence of a clear feminist agenda, see M. de Larrabeiti, 'Conspicuous before the world: the political rhetoric of the Chartist movement', in Yeo, ed., *Radical femininity*, pp. 106–26. [46] CC CP 126/2: *Conference*, p. 5. [47] Ibid., p. 20.

[48] CC CP 292: *Report of the work of the Consumers' Council*, 5 Nov. 1920.

on 14 December 1920, complaining that 'their advice was often neglected, their suggestions ignored', while 'the interests of the traders [were] primarily considered'.[49] If women and working-class consumers were given an officially recognized voice in the First World War, it was a voice that was by no means heard in all the corridors of Whitehall. The major influence of the Consumers' Council, in terms of its effects, was more a success for the government in its policy of containment: it quietened working-class discontent over food policy and set important precedents in the regulation of the economy that would be utilized again in the Second World War.

But the broader historiographical implications of women's involvement in the Consumers' Council and the Food Control Committees should not be ignored. First, it provides one instance of how issues usually restricted to the domestic sphere could produce new opportunities for the politically disenfranchised. If voluntarism and philanthropy in the nineteenth century enabled many middle-class women to enter the conventional political arena, then issues surrounding consumption facilitated, to an admittedly limited extent, a greater political influence for working-class women consumers. Secondly, it points to the continued politicization of working-class women's consumption into the inter-war period. Gillian Scott argues that the WCG was de-radicalized in the 1920s as it came to be dominated by women more concerned with their careers in the Labour and Co-operative Parties than with independently representing the concerns of the working-class housewife.[50] An overtly feminist agenda may well have been lost by the 1920s, but this is not to deny the important role women were expected to play in the fight for the 'Co-operative Commonwealth'. Co-operative Union propaganda depicted the female consumer and the male labourer joining in a united project to 'advance' to a better world and even Davies was committed to a broad-ranging co-operative ideal that was increasingly being put forward in the 1920s by writers such as Percy Redfern, Leonard Woolf, and Harold Laski.[51] Women such as Beatrice Webb were crucial to this reformulation of co-operation as the new basis of citizenship and while many might have regarded women's input primarily through their roles as wives and mothers, these roles were crucial to the new social movement.[52] As Evelyn Sharp put it, woman 'is queen of

[49] CC CP 316/1: *The Consumers' Council: statement on their resignation from Ministry of Food*, 12 Jan. 1921.

[50] Scott, *Feminism and the politics of working women*. For a less pessimistic account of the WCG in the inter-war years than that provided by Scott see M. Pugh, *Women and the women's movement in Britain, 1914–1959* (Basingstoke, 1992).

[51] See the 1944 film, *Advance democracy*, re-released by the National Co-operative Film Archive; M. L. Davies, *Women as organised consumers* (London, 1921); P. Redfern, *The consumers' place in society* (Manchester, 1920); L. Woolf, *The way of peace* (London, 1928); H. Laski, *The recovery of citizenship* (London, 1928). Many of these pamphlets were published in a series collected together as P. Redfern, ed., *Self and society: social and economic problems from the hitherto neglected point of view of the consumer* (London, 1930).

[52] B. Webb, *The discovery of the consumer* (London, 1928); M. Bondfield, *The meaning of trade* (London, 1928).

consumers, because she is the family buyer': the co-operative housewife 'is the New Woman of the masses'.[53] Thirdly, and finally, the Consumers' Council did at least provide important precedents for state involvement in consumption. Pressure for a revised Council was a constant demand of Parliament in the inter-war period. This led to the creation of the Royal Commission on Food Prices in 1924 and the subsequent appointment of a Food Council in 1925.[54] When this was held to be inadequate, Labour and Co-operative Party members pushed for the creation of a revised Consumers' Council in 1929 and again in 1939 with a much broader remit.[55] Again, as with the Consumers' Council of the First World War, when the consumer interest was articulated at the level of Parliament and the Board of Trade, it was seen as either a broader working-class or public interest, though this was always predicated on the knowledge that it was the working-class housewife who had to bear the immediate brunt of the problems that attended any increase in the cost of living.

III

These developments ought not to be forgotten, even if an emerging trend was the gradual reconstitution of the 'consumer', the 'consumer interest', and the consumer spokesperson in the inter-war period, whereby the consumer imagined from within the state apparatus increasingly came to be that of the middle-class woman. As well as a desire by Conservative politicians to keep working-class women out of the Food Council and the Consumer Committees connected to the Agricultural Marketing Boards in the 1930s, this was due to the extraordinary growth of 'non-feminist', 'conservative' women's organizations in the period. For instance, the National Federation of Women's Institutes, set up in 1915, had 240,000 members by 1928, and the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds, set up in 1929, had 54,000 members by 1939. Catriona Beaumont has shown that, together with other organizations such as the Mothers' Union, the Young Women's Christian Association, the Catholic Women's League, and the National Council of Women, non-feminist women developed a notion of citizenship that supported civic duty, domesticity, social and political responsibility involving an interest in parliamentary legislation, election as local government officers, involvement in voluntary bodies,

[53] E. Sharp, *Daily bread* (London, 1928), pp. 10–11. Daniel Miller has placed a similar emphasis on the power of the housewife in today's society, proclaiming that she acts as the bridge between the western consumer and the third world producer: 'Consumption as the vanguard of history: a polemic by way of an introduction', in D. Miller, ed., *Acknowledging consumption: a review of new studies* (London, 1995), pp. 1–57.

[54] Parliamentary Papers (hereafter PP), *First report of the Royal Commission on Food Prices*, Cmd. 2390 (London, 1925); M. French and J. Phillips, *Cheated not poisoned? Food regulation in the United Kingdom, 1875–1938* (Manchester, 2000), p. 143.

[55] R. A. Bayliss, 'The Consumers' Council, 1918–1921', *Journal of Consumer Studies and Home Economics*, 3 (1979), pp. 37–45; idem, 'The Consumers' Councils Bills 1929–1939', *Journal of Consumer Studies and Home Economics*, 4 (1980), pp. 115–23.

community work, fund-raising, and charity.[56] They would come to represent the women's and the consumers' interest in a greater variety of government committees, eclipsing any real or potential influence women of the co-operative and labour movement might have seen as rightfully theirs.

During the Second World War the trend accelerated with, for example, the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) mobilizing over one million women. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska has most recently outlined the economic controls put in place as part of the 1940s' austerity measures. Although the Co-operative Union participated to a greater extent in the running of the war-time economy than it had in the First World War, the government was careful not to provide a forum for a coherent working-class consumer politics to emerge as had occurred in the Consumers' Council. Instead, the largely middle-class housewives of the Women's Institutes, the Townswomen's Guilds, and the WVS were called upon for consultation on domestic provisioning through the Advisory Committee on Consumer Rationing, the Consumer Panel, and the Consumer Needs Division.[57] According to Zweiniger-Bargielowska, these women became a powerful consumer voice. While they put up with controls during the war in the national interest, they became increasingly impatient with the Labour Party's austerity measures in the late 1940s, preferring instead a return to competition and market liberalization, a notion of consumer-citizenship in sharp contrast to that advocated by labour women at the end of the First World War. Groups such as the Housewives' League went on to campaign against controls and, Zweiniger-Bargielowska contends, the female vote strongly influenced the general elections of 1950 and 1951 as women preferred the Conservative's message of de-control over the Labour Party's policy of regulation and fair shares.[58]

The movement towards the reconfiguration of the consumer culminated in the organizational changes of the British Standards Institute (BSI). After concerning itself with mainly industrial products since its conception in 1901, the BSI was under pressure to begin awarding its Kitemark to consumer goods. Following a recommendation of the National Council of Women (NCW), the BSI invited several women representatives to meet at the BSI from 1946 to discuss consumer standards. It was not until 1951, though, that the BSI inaugurated the Women's Advisory Committee (WAC), consisting of representatives of twenty-two leading women's organizations, so that it could

[56] C. Beaumont, 'Women and citizenship: a study of non-feminist women's societies and the women's movement in England, 1928–1950' (PhD thesis, Warwick, 1996).

[57] I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: rationing, controls and consumption, 1939–1955* (Oxford, 2000).

[58] Pugh, *Women and the women's movement*, especially chs. 9 and 10; J. Hinton, 'Voluntarism and the welfare/warfare state: Women's Voluntary Services in the 1940s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 9 (1998), pp. 274–305. On the debate over the influence of the British Housewives' League on the electoral politics see I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Bread rationing in Britain, July 1946 – July 1948', *Twentieth Century British History*, 4 (1993), pp. 57–85, and J. Hinton, 'Militant housewives: the British Housewives' League and the Attlee government', *History Workshop Journal*, 38 (1994), pp. 129–56.

'ascertain the views' of women regarding standards 'of interest to women'.[59] The consumer interest was clearly constructed as the women's interest, though women here were much more conservatively defined (according to either gender or politics) than in the Consumers' Council of the First World War. Although the WCG was represented, its delegates had to fight for their views to be heard above those of the National Council of Women, the Women's Voluntary Services, the Townswomen's Guild, the Federation of Soroptomist Clubs, the Federation of Women's Institutes, the Electrical Association for Women, the Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, and the Good Housekeeping Institute.[60] As such, the notion of the consumer that came to be articulated within the BSI was that of the sensible housewife, doused in the practical wisdom of decent British common sense, who would make, on her own, the best decisions over quality and price. The market, therefore, would be bolstered by the discriminating female shopper, leading to the improved quality of British goods which would, in turn, boost the export drive. The consumer interest that needed to be represented in public bodies (or semi-public bodies such as the partially government-financed BSI) was simply one of helping industry improve safety standards and informing technicians of women's needs in the home so that better designed goods could be manufactured.

It was only natural that the business-oriented BSI should select consumers from organizations far less likely to offer a critique of the private distribution of goods. But the BSI assumes a greater prominence when its activities are placed in the context of increasing consumer affluence and the growing demand for improved standards in consumer durables that came from an expanding middle and upper-working class which had far greater income to dispose of. As consumer issues became more important within the BSI and politics more generally, the consumer voice was internally reconstituted through the formation of the BSI's Consumer Advisory Council (CAC) in 1955. The CAC's twenty-five members met quarterly and consisted of eight members of the WAC, plus the broadcaster Ruth Drew and the journalist Marghanita Laski. The other members included male representatives of the trade union and the co-operative movement, the economist Graham Hutton, and the statistician Mark Abrams, with the rest being made up of business and retailing directors.[61] The CAC published its own *Shopper's guide*, edited by Elizabeth Gundrey, which sold 50,000 copies by 1959, committed to helping the consumer 'distinguish between the good, the not-so-good, and the frankly bad'.[62] The CAC also advised on standards and product labelling, sought to educate the

[59] BSI, *The history of the Women's Advisory Committee of the British Standards Institution* (BSI unpublished manuscript, 1970s?).

[60] Board of Trade (hereafter BT) 258/879: Committee on Consumer Protection (hereafter CCP) 12: *Submission by Women's Advisory Committee*.

[61] BT 258/879: CCP 4: BSI, *Speaking for the consumer: third annual report of the Advisory Council on Standards for Consumer Goods, 1957–1958*.

[62] Printed on the inside cover of each issue of *Shopper's guide*.

consumer, and liaised with other government bodies.[63] Women obviously played an important role in the CAC and the BSI, but what becomes apparent throughout the 1950s is that, because of the deliberate selection of consumer representatives, the official definition of the 'consumer interest' gradually began to lose its associations with the housewife's interest. Furthermore, if the membership of consumer panels goes some way to answering the question, 'Who speaks for the consumer?', then the working-class housewife no longer had a public voice, replaced as she was by the middle-class woman, who was in turn followed by the male company director.

What becomes clear at this point is that a new consumer agenda had emerged that allied business and non-feminist women's organizations and which competed with the older consumer politics of the political left. Whether or not a new female consumer interest led to the ousting from government of Labour in 1951, Zweiniger-Bargielowska is correct to identify a preference for competition over controls. The problem for Labour was its relative inability to develop a politics of consumption that could speak to issues of luxury as well as of necessity, of affluence as well as poverty, imbued as it was with the ascetic traditions of Tawney and the Webbs. A consumer politics that urged greater choice and more competition was thus more likely to appeal to the electorate and various interests within government. The Molony Committee on Consumer Protection, appointed in 1959, provides a further useful case study to examine the presentation and success – in terms of official recognition – of competing consumer interests. The Molony Committee published its final, massive report of over 300 pages in 1962. The Committee was a watershed in consumer protection. It reviewed all existing state consumer policies, from the Weights and Measures legislation, safety regulations, the Sale of Goods Act, and hire purchase restrictions, and set the agenda for consumerism throughout the late twentieth century. Its recommendations led directly to the creation of the Consumer Council in 1963 and the Trade Descriptions Act of 1968, and set the crucial precedents for the expansion of state activity in consumer affairs that occurred during the 1970s.[64] Issues of class and gender are crucial to understanding its conclusions and the relations of power operating within it.

The Committee aroused controversy as soon as its initial members were appointed. The chair, J. T. Molony, a leading barrister in common law, was supported by eleven 'experts' on consumer affairs, including Lord Geddes, a holder of several company directorships, two solicitors, a stockbroker, a civil servant, a director of a consumer research statistics company, and a department store senior manager. Four women were placed on the Committee, none of whom served as a representative of a consumer organization.[65] Lesley

[63] BT 258/879: CCP 13: *Submission by the CAC of the BSI.*

[64] PP, *Final report of the committee on Consumer Protection*, Cmnd. 1781 (London, 1962). I discuss the Molony Committee more generally and at greater length in 'Consumer politics in post-war Britain', in Hilton and Daunton, eds., *The politics of consumption.*

[65] PP, *Final report*, p. ii; BT 258/879: CCP 6: *Terms of reference and minutes of appointment.*

Beauchamp, Dorothy Stone, and Beryl Diamond were selected in their capacities as independent housewives and A. L. Richmond, selected according to John Rodgers, Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Trade, because she enjoyed 'the three-fold advantage of being a woman, a Scot and a trade unionist of considerable experience'.[66] Certainly, Richmond was a capable advocate of consumer issues, but illness prevented her from attending any more than nine meetings (out of a total of fifty-seven) and she was replaced by a Mrs I. O. Stewart, a far less vociferous or experienced consumer advocate.[67] The absence of the organized representatives found on the earlier Consumers' Council was questioned in Parliament. The Labour politician, George Darling, was just one of many MPs to wonder why no working-class housewives were considered 'intelligent enough to be on a Committee of this kind. When we think of all the organisations to which working-class housewives belong, women's guilds, townswomen's guilds, trade union branches and so on, and of all the work they do in local government, we find this kind of snob attitude rather irritating.'[68] The Conservative Patricia McLaughlin, usually a consumer advocate, came to the government's defence on this point with the interesting assumption of homogeneity when she argued that the women already on the Committee would be 'perfectly capable to put the housewife's case satisfactorily'.[69] Similarly, Rodgers was asked why no representatives of the co-operative movement appeared on the Committee. He replied that the omission was not out of 'spite' or 'stupidity', as *Reynold's News* had alleged, but because the government felt the Co-operative Union too concerned with a 'particular viewpoint and not with balancing opposing considerations'.[70] It was an intriguing view of partiality, clearly not thought relevant to the 'objective' businessmen of the Committee.

The workings of the Committee further established how the consumer voice was articulated and heard in public. The vastly experienced Geddes and Molony dominated proceedings and the interventions of Diamond and Beauchamp hardly appear in the minutes. Richmond, the only woman with considerable committee experience, retired in May 1960 leaving the male members to speak for the consumer, despite their underlying assumption which often surfaced that consumption lay in the realm of the woman's expertise. The treatment of evidence submitted also reflected certain class, gender, and political prejudices. Written submissions were received from 472 organizations and individuals, while a further 1,918 letters were sent in by members of the public.[71] 277 witnesses were called in to provide further information: 142 of these were male representatives from trade associations and private companies,

[66] *House of Commons Debates* (hereafter *HC Deb.*), 610, 27 July 1959, cols. 73–4.
[67] BT 258/878: Meeting 21, 3 Oct. 1960, minute 21:121.
[68] *HC Deb.*, 610, 27 July 1959, col. 65. See also the complaints from other members of the Labour and Co-operative consumer lobby (Elaine Burton, Norman Dodds, Herbert Morrison, and A. E. Oram): *HC Deb.*, 608, 9 July 1959, col. 1560; 609, 16 July 1959, cols. 571–2, *43*.
[69] *HC Deb.*, 610, 27 July 1959, col. 48.
[70] *HC Deb.*, 610, 27 July 1959, col. 76.
[71] PP, *Final report*, p. iii.

56 men were from central and local government bodies; 27 from a range of individuals (which included a few women such as Marghanita Laski); and 39 from professional organizations or special interest groups (including here some consumer bodies).[72] This productivist bias was typical of the close relations Helen Mercer has shown to have existed between industry and government throughout the post-war development of competition policy and the consequent scepticism with which existing consumer bodies were regarded.[73] Mercer demonstrates the extent to which the manufacturing interest directed legislation on restrictive practices and monopoly control, and the Molony Committee was very much a part of this government–industry collusion. This perhaps explains the frequent outright dismissal of evidence from actual consumers and the preference for hearing evidence from male businessmen over consumer housewives (of whatever social classs). The letters from members of the public were not examined and, when the Consumers' Association suggested it conduct a survey of its members' views in collaboration with the Committee, the offer was rejected.[74] When a survey of shopping habits was commissioned by the Central Office of Information, its results were presented to the Committee in the form of a two page summary by Bedford Attwood, a marketing expert who concluded for consumers by suggesting that housewives were 'satisfied that their ability to switch buying from one product to another is adequate protection'.[75]

If consumers themselves were denied a voice, were women's associations allowed entry into this official arena? Elaine Burton had long been the consumer advocate in the Labour Party. She was outspoken in Parliament, calling for statutory quality standards and better product labelling, and was an early supporter of a National Consumer Council.[76] She appeared to continue the tradition of a feminine counterpublic of consumption that stretched back to Billington-Greig if not before. In 1954, she published *The battle of the consumer*, a pamphlet in which she equated the shopper with the citizen. It was 'just not good enough for traders to say that housewives should find out for themselves what goods are like'; 'it is the duty of the government to give the shopper some protection and guidance'.[77] Burton was a recognized authority on consumer issues in Parliament and was disappointed not to have been appointed to the Molony Committee.[78] When her pamphlet was submitted in evidence, however, it provoked little discussion.[79] Molony considered that it was made up of 'loose thinking and loose use of language and made no positive contribution to the Committee's task'. The views of the largely working-class housewives

[72] Ibid., Appendix B, pp. 317–21.
[73] H. Mercer, *Constructing a competitive order : the hidden history of British anti-trust policy* (Cambridge, 1995).
[74] BT 258/879: CCP 20: *CA questionnaire*.
[75] BT 258/886: CCP 193: *Survey of shopping habits*.
[76] *HC Deb*., 602, 26 Mar. 1959, col. 1610; 604, 23 Apr. 1959, cols. 585–6.
[77] E. Burton, *The battle of the consumer* (London, 1954), p. 7.
[78] *HC Deb*., 602, 20 Mar. 1959, col. 858.
[79] BT 258/882: CCP 84: *Submission by Miss Elaine Burton*.

expressed in Burton's submission were dismissed as the opinions of an 'ill-informed and uncritical section of the community' which lacked the necessary 'independence' for critical judgement. The Committee agreed that Burton's pamphlet contained 'no valid evidence or worthwhile suggestion'.

Such a disregard for the views of the female consumer who, in other circumstances, was celebrated as the great British pillar of the family and domestic economy, was typical of the Committee's attitude. Evidence was received from a number of women's groups, including the Women's Co-operative Guild, the Women's Institute, the National Council of Women, the Good Housekeeping Institute, the Women's Group on Public Welfare, and the Women's Advisory Council of the BSI, together with that of organizations in which women played a prominent role: the Co-operative Union; the Consumer Advisory Council, and the Consumers' Association. The women's groups all advocated a moderate range of consumer protection measures, in comparison to the international regulation of capitalism supported by the First World War Consumers' Council. Indeed, what is remarkable is the relative lack of difference in the policies advocated by the various consumer groups, whether associated with the political left or otherwise. They called for the greater use of labelling, the promotion of standards, the extension of comparative product testing and the dissemination of its results, the restriction of misleading statements, and the creation of an independent body to represent, educate, and inform itself of the consumer interest.[80] Much of this evidence was merely noted by the Committee, was not discussed further, and only the WAC was requested to send representatives to be interviewed.[81] Attached to the submission by the CAC was a note by the Committee secretary, Mitchelmore, calling into question its independence. A Co-operative pamphlet, published especially for the Molony Committee and submitted as evidence, was merely noted in the minutes.[82] The evidence of the Advertising Inquiry Council, a watchdog organization set up by the consumer champions, Elizabeth Gundrey, H. Cole, and Aubrey Diamond, was considered for only a fraction of the time spent on examining the selling industry's own voluntary body, the Advertising Standards Authority.[83] And the evidence of the Consumers' Association, formed in 1957 and ever gaining in respectability through its publication, *Which?*, was persistently discredited by the Committee which followed the accusations of a number of businessmen that the private organization must necessarily lack independence, reflect too closely the interest of the middle

[80] BT 258/879: CCP 14: *Submission by the Good Housekeeping Institute*; CCP 12: *Submission by WAC*; CCP 13: *Submission by CAC*; BT 258/882, CCP 90: *Submission by National Federation of Women's Institutes*; CCP 91: *Submission of the National Council of Women of Great Britain*; CCP 92: *Submission by the Women's Group on Public Welfare*; CCP 93: *Submission by the Women's Co-operative Guild*.

[81] BT 258/879: Meeting 5, 7 Dec. 1959, minute 5:21.

[82] BT 258/882: CCP 96: *Co-operative Union: memorandum for submission to the Molony Committee on Consumer Protection*.

[83] BT 258/879: Meeting 39, 29 May 1961, minute 39:238; BT 258/885: CCP 168: *Submission by the Advertising Inquiry Council*.

class, and be open to corruption in its analysis of the quality of consumer goods.[84]

As women and consumer groups were eclipsed from this official public sphere of consumption by commercial organizations, the consumer interest came to be constructed by men and business groups. Complaints were made in Parliament about the predominance of manufacturers' views, a response to the Committee's unceasing willingness to invite dozens of business enterprises to provide similar evidence.[85] Voluntary methods were supported over government intervention, competition over controls, and consumer issues were identified as mere 'grumbling'.[86] While consumer advocates were frowned upon, the Committee secretary would enthuse over 'the cheerful and forceful character' of a member of the Retail Trading Standards Association who, he believed, was 'a rugger player of some distinction'.[87] As consumption was now no longer laughed out of Parliament as it had been in 1920, its discussion in mainstream political debate had embraced an entirely different rhetoric of the 'consumer'. The appeals to the needs of the housewife were replaced with a notion of the consumer as a rational individual, an economic agent, or simply a shopper, rather than a citizen with attendant rights and duties.[88]

This shift away from women's interests in consumption is also explained by the models of the affluent consumer promoted by various groups. Non-feminist women's groups may have advocated greater consumer protection and representation, but ultimately they often felt the best form of protection lay in individual discrimination within a free market, a model of consumerism entirely in accord with business interests. The Co-operative Union and Women's Co-operative Guild also called for a more interventionist Consumer Council but they never went so far as to demand a system of price controls for consumer durables as they had done for foods and goods identified as necessities in the inter-war period. As state-sponsored constructions of the consumer became less overtly gendered, the emerging post-war consumer movement also posited the consumer interest as an individual, gender-neutral concern: the key to consumer power in an age of affluence being imagined as non-hedonistic,

[84] PP, *Final report*, p. 122; BT 258/878: Meeting 3, 2 Nov. 1959, minute 3:9; Meeting 15, 11 Apr. 1960, minute 15:77; Meeting 18, 30 May 1960, minute 18:101; BT 258/883: CCP 114: *Submissions by S. N. Bridges and Co. Ltd. and Wolf Electrical Tools Ltd*; BT 258/878: Meeting 25, 5 Dec. 1960, minute 25:146; Meeting 33, 10 Apr. 1961, minute 33:205; Meeting 3, 2 Nov. 1959, minute 3:9; BT 258/880: CCP 20: *CA questionnaire*. On the history of the Consumers' Association see D. A. Aaker and G. S. Day, eds., *Consumerism: search for the consumer interest* (3rd edn, Basingstoke, 1978); Y. Gabriel and T. Lang, *The unmanageable consumer: contemporary consumption and its fragmentation* (London, 1995).

[85] *HC Deb.*, 678, 20 May 1963, col. 136.

[86] BT 258/878: Meeting 14, 4 Apr. 1960, minute 14:66; Meeting 20, 4 July 1960, minute 20:116.

[87] BT 258/879, CCP 9: *Proposed submission by the Retail Trading Standards Association*, note by Mitchelmore [Secretary].

[88] For a similar development in the US see L. Cohen, 'Citizens and consumers in the century of mass consumption', and M. Hilton, 'Post-war consumer politics', in Hilton and Daunton, eds., *Politics of consumption*.

rational, value-for-money, *Which?*-buying consumption. Many, if not all, supporters of the new consumerism embodied in the Consumers' Association urged the shopper to be 'efficient', 'rational', 'scientific', 'objective', 'informed', and 'discriminating'.[89] The Fabian Harbury had little room for 'embarrassing' 'ignorance', 'inability', 'short-sightedness', and 'wasteful', 'irrational' expenditure,[90] while Robert Millar imagined a super-consumer who would rise above the herd of sheep: 'two nations' would then emerge, the educated consumer leaving behind the 'fickle', 'ignorant', 'deluded', and 'illogical'.[91] The Consumers' Association embraced this style of consumerism most completely so that one recent commentator has claimed that its value-for-money magazine, '*Which?*, repudiates the irrationalist anti-Enlightenment thrust of postmodernism.'[92] All design is reduced to function and all purchases are decided by a cost-benefit analysis that leaves no room for questions of aesthetics, style, or impulse buying. In short, the consumer was becoming de-sexed. While the Consumers' Council had usually referred to a gender-neutral category, occasionally it allowed the feminine pronoun to replace the term consumer, betraying its underlying assumptions about the shopper. This feminization, which continued through and beyond the Second World War, suggested a persistent gender consciousness. It is significant, therefore, that in the 1950s, the masculine pronoun came to be used in consumer debate and its adoption in the *Final report* of the Molony Committee suggests more than just an adherence to conventions of written language. The consumer was now very much *homo economicus*: 'The business of buying is conducted by the smallest unit, the individual consumer, relying on the guidance afforded by experience, if he possesses it, and, if not, on instinctive but not always rational thought processes … The interests of the consumer are sometimes overlooked because he is voiceless.'[93]

The immediate outcome of the Molony Committee was the creation of the Consumer Council in 1963. As a formal institution of the state apparatus, it invites comparison with the earlier Consumers' Council of the First World War. It initially consisted of twelve members, all appointed by the President of the Board of Trade. These were to act as individuals, not as representatives of any consumer groups, though Lord Peddie was a director of the Co-operative Wholesale Society and Baroness Elliott of Harwood, the chair, was a vice-president of the Consumers' Association. There was an equal gender mix with Elizabeth Ackroyd, a civil servant, acting as the first director. Business interests were limited and consumer advocates such as Aubrey L. Diamond were

[89] Association of Scientific Workers, *Spotlight on shopping: consumer research* (London, 1951), pp. 24–7; M. Baynes, *Advertising on trial: the case for the consumer* (London, 1956), p. 2; P. Goodhart, M. Bemrose, J. Douglas, I. MacArthur, P. McLaughlin, and J. B. Wood, *Choice: a report on consumer protection* (London, 1961); P. Goodhart, *A nation of consumers* (London, 1965).

[90] C. D. Harbury, *Efficiency and the consumer* (London, 1958).

[91] R. Millar, *The affluent sheep: a profile of the British consumer* (London, 1963), p. 196.

[92] A. Aldridge, 'The construction of rational consumption in *Which?* magazine: the more blobs the better', *Sociology*, 28 (1994), pp. 899–912.

[93] PP, *Final report*, p. 292.

appointed.[94] As with the earlier Council, its powers were limited, merely acting to inform itself of consumer issues, to consider solutions to any problem that arose, and to provide consumer advice and guidance. It was not allowed to engage in comparative testing, enforce the law, or take up complaints on behalf of individual consumers.[95] In terms of participation in a government institution, the gender breakdown was more equal than in 1918, yet no working-class women were represented. The Molony Committee had been eager to prevent any organized movement being involved in the Council, unlike in the case of the earlier body. By only allowing members to act as individuals, Molony tried to enforce the liberal model of consumer individualism over any notions of collective representation.[96] Its terms of reference were designed to ensure the discussion of consumer issues within a certain ideological framework, something which provoked much criticism. As George Darling argued in Parliament, he and others suspected that the Consumer Council had been 'set up in part as an excuse for doing nothing'.[97] Disillusion with the Council thus set in much earlier than it had with the First World War Consumers' Council.

IV

Where does all this leave the notion of a feminist politics of consumption as advocated by Billington-Greig? The narrative here has outlined the transformation of the officially imagined consumer from that of a collective notion of the working class as a whole, within which women's interests were prominent and allied with the concerns of labour, to a more precisely defined middle-class housewife and on to a gender-neutral category of the rational consumer which embraced the post-war affluent male. There are no women 'in revolt' in this process, as Billington-Greig would have it. Nevertheless, gender continued to shape and inform consumer politics. Women were prominent members of the 1960s Consumer Council and have continued to be so in the Consumers' Association, the local consumer groups that sprang up around the country from the early 1960s and in the National Consumer Council created in 1975. And gender issues have directed and constructed consumer concerns, most notably in the metaphors of rape and penetration that characterized the campaigns against the activities of unscrupulous door-to-door salesmen who have been alleged to prey on the ignorant innocence of the young housewife left alone at home in the new and expanding suburbs.[98]

But in accounting for the changes within the gendered nature of the politics of consumption, it is necessary here to return to Billington-Greig and her notion of women's engagement with politics that might usefully be thought of as a

[94] Consumer Council, *Information for consumer education* (London, 1965).
[95] *HC Deb*., 674, 26 Mar. 1963, col. 139.
[96] PP, *Final report*, pp. 281–90.
[97] *HC Deb*., 678, 20 May 1963, col. 36. See also 'A correspondent', 'The helpless consumer', *Socialist Commentary*, June 1965, pp. 19–21.
[98] See Consumer Council's *Annual reports*, 1963–70 (London: HMSO, 1964–71).

subaltern counterpublic. To some extent, a female counterpublic of consumption persisted throughout the early twentieth century. The Consumers' Council merely gave official expression to a politics of consumption often repeated in socialist and co-operative circles and which would continue in the trade unions' and Labour Party's concerns over the cost of living in the 1930s when many consumer advocates made interchangeable the expressions consumer, the public, and the working-class housewife. These interests – manifested in the demands for price controls for foodstuffs and essential items such as clothing – did not readily translate into a consumer politics for less necessitous commodities from the late 1940s. At this point the consumer was increasingly imagined as the affluent shopper within the media and whose interests were articulated more forcefully by middle-class women's organizations. Their notion of the consumer-citizen – the sensible, discriminating shopper – easily developed into the almost hyper-rational and super-efficient purchaser of *Which?* magazine.

If these groups represented counterpublics of consumption, what of the official arena which gave legitimacy to certain consumer politics within the apparatus of the state? If the working-class consumers of the First World War, the middle-class women's groups ultimately connected to the BSI, and the new middle-class *Which?*-buying consumers' movement of the 1950s offered alternative visions of the consumer interest, the relationships they developed with the business and political groups attached to the official public sphere provide some explanation of change over time. The popular support for consumer issues necessitated some incorporation of consumer affairs into national political life and, by a process of selecting who could speak for the consumer, the nature of the official consumer and the consumer interest came to be that based on an individualistic model which offered no fundamental opposition to the ideology of the free market. Without the full support of the trade-union-dominated Labour Party, working-class consumers and co-operators were increasingly marginalized. This was done both deliberately – by an economic policy more strongly influenced by manufacturing concerns – and unintentionally – by a new strand of consumerism that although initially treated with suspicion would come to be more easily incorporated into the official public sphere through the mutual regard for individualistic economic liberalism. Although the public sphere of consumption as advocated by Billington-Greig never came into being, the questions of power, interest, and language acting upon the official sphere mirror in many ways the problems that historians have come to associate with Habermas's bourgeois male public sphere. However, while her manifesto was indeed idealistic, in her stress on the importance of the politics of consumption, she certainly pointed to one of the central means by which the relationship between the individual and the state has been negotiated throughout the twentieth century.