Shut Up and Shop!
Thinking Politically About Consumption [1]

By Matthew Paterson

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From the moment, I was born
    I opened my eyes
    I reached out
    For my credit card
Oh no! I left it in my other suit!

Gang of Four, ‘Capital, it fails us now’, (EMI, 1981)

How should we think about questions of consumption in relation to, on the one hand Global Environmental Politics, and on the other, Global Political Economy? In relation to both fields, we might expect much debate about the way that consumption and consumerism helps to generate environmental degradation and hinder efforts to move towards sustainability, and about the role of consumption in reproducing global capitalism. But such connections are only very rarely made. This paper attempts to think through how we might make such connections.

Consumption in Global Environmental Politics, International Political Economy and Cultural Studies

In Global Environmental Politics (GEP), consumption has in general been almost entirely neglected. It is entirely absent from the majority of works which deal with international environmental regimes (e.g. Young 1989, 1994), or appears only tangentially in occasional lists of causes of environmental degradation (e.g. Levy, Keohane & Haas 1993: 423; Choucri 1993: 9-10), [2] This is despite the fact that environmental activists and writers frequently identify consumption and consumerism as one of the key drivers of environmental degradation (e.g. Durning 1992; Westra & Werhane 1998). In part, this neglect is because most debates in GEP have abstracted from questions concerning the origins/causes of environmental degradation, with a preference for focusing on how states collectively respond to environmental change (Paterson 2000).

More recently, there have been some attempts in GEP to address question of consumption. I made some tentative moves in this regard in Understanding Global Environmental Politics (2000) in relation to cars and to meat/fast food. The fullest

[1][2] For an extended analysis of these accounts of causes of environmental degradation in GEP, see Paterson 2000: 26-29.
attempt however is in Princen, Conca and Maniates’ edited book *Confronting Consumption* (2002).\(^2\)\(^3\) *Confronting Consumption* provides an enormous contribution to debates in GEP and a real step forward in how we think about the subject. It both shows the impacts of consumption on the environment, provides some key conceptual categories for analysing consumption/environment connections, and a number of substantive analyses both of particular aspects of consumption, as well as of various attempts, from counter-cultural strategies such as *Adbusters* to concrete alternative political economies like LETS schemes, to move towards less consumption-oriented economies. But there are two specific problems in the way that most authors in the volume, as well as some authors elsewhere dealing with questions of consumption, that I want to pick up on. First, it tends towards an economistic definition of consumption. It is conceived of as an aggregate measure of total economic/ecological throughput rather than in terms of sets of individual and collective consumption practices. And when it does think in terms of individual consumption practices, it relies often on notions of false consciousness. This conception arises out of its general origins in environmentalism which has also tended to think in these terms, albeit not with Marxian language.\(^3\)\(^4\) I will revisit this question of both how to define consumption and explain consumption practices later.

Second, and more immediately important for my purposes, it is also problematic in the way in which consumption is connected to politics. There are a number of differences in the way this is done.

Sometimes politics is simply ignored. Princen (2001) for example discusses the need to confront questions of consumption in highly technical and (implicitly) manageralist terms. He focuses on the need to think in terms of consumption instead of (or more precisely as well as) production in order to get to the heart of the problem of the ecological implications of economic practices. He shows very persuasively the need to question consumption (understood as aggregate quantitative throughput) rather than simply assume that all specific problems can be dealt with by production changes (catalytic converters, etc). But there are only glimmers of a recognition of how radical a questioning of ever-expanding consumption is in the context of capitalist society. Maniates has a clearer understanding of this, suggesting that many in the voluntary simplicity movement are naïve in assuming that social change of the sort they envisage can come about without a fundamental challenge to economic and political elites (2002: 227 and 234). But the implications of thinking through this political connection are still underdeveloped.

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\(^2\) Some of the papers from the book appeared earlier in the journal *Global Environmental Politics* (Princen 2001; Conca 2001; Maniates 2001).

\(^3\) In the GEP debates neglecting consumption discussed above, to the extent it appears, it tends to be understood more in naturalistic terms as a natural expression of human desires. ‘The most fundamental unit … is the individual human … who … responds to felt needs, wants, and desires, by making demands and acting upon natural and social environments in order to survive’, writes Nazli Choucri, representing this understanding (1993: 9-10; Paterson 2000: 27). It will hopefully be clear from what follows that this is even more hopeless an account than the ‘false consciousness’ one.
A consequence of this ‘apolitical’ understanding of consumption is the notion of ‘sustainable consumption’ and more particularly ‘sustainable consumption governance’, being developed both in academic literature (e.g. Fuchs & Lorek 2002; Cohen & Murphy 2001; Paavola 2001; Murphy & Michaelis forthcoming) and by a range of international organisations including UNEP, UNDP and the OECD (OECD 1997, 1998; UNDP 1998; UNEP/Manoochehri 2001, see also http://www.uneptie.org/pc//sustain/). Regulating consumption is conceived of as a technical activity – the problem is to identify over-consumption, to work out means of reducing that consumption, and so on, as if this is something without political importance. Where politics appears, it is often as an exhortation to policy makers to support patterns of sustainable consumption. For example Murphy and Michaelis (forthcoming) discuss Goodman and Goodman’s (2001) argument for reorganised producer-consumer networks in the food system to promote sustainability. Murphy and Michaelis argue in their conclusion that “the role of the government is to make it possible for such networks to emerge and to protect them if they do”. The conceptualisation of the state here is woefully inadequate – in particular the reasons why states have supported the creation of unsustainable consumption patterns and commodity chains is unexplained. But as I hope to show below, this is simultaneously dangerously naïve – ignoring both the structural requirements of states and multilateral institutions to promote growth in consumption and thus the political conflicts which can be expected to result from calls to reduce consumption – and worryingly technocratic, representing what could emerge as a highly authoritarian form of ‘green governmentality’.

In other accounts, politics and consumption are connected by contrast. Maniates (2001) exemplifies this position in his focus on the way that focusing on consumption tends to individualise responses to environmental problem, whereas they should be more properly thought of in terms of collective action and individuals as consumers not citizens. This critique has appeared in different forms in various debates around green strategy. A classic argument is Mark Sagoff’s account emphasising the contrast between consumer identities, rooted in individualism, and citizen identities, rooted in a conception of community and collective choice (Sagoff 1988). It is also a standard critique of environmentalists by those on the left, who suggest that green’s tendency to focus on actions which individuals can take to ‘save the earth’, especially in the discourses of ‘green consumerism’ negate the importance of political action and often also take away from a focus on structural inequalities (e.g Luke 1997: ch. 6). Another variant of this argument is that a focus on consumption also raises significant questions about gender inequalities. Bretherton (1996) argues that a focus on consumption is one of a series of environmental discourses which tends to make women the ‘problem’ (1996: 101) as they undertake the majority of consuming acts. Such discourses neglect again the structural inequalities within households which such a simplistic focus on the act of purchasing masks. Again, the implication is principally that a focus on consumption is to abstract from a more properly political ecological project. As Maniates argues, a more politically adequate account would assume that:
Individual consumption choices are environmentally important, but that their control over these choices is constrained, shaped, and framed by institutions and political forces that can be remade only through collective citizen action, as opposed to individual consumer behaviour. (Maniates 2001: 50, emphasis added)

The problem for me here is not the emphasis on the structural forces shaping consumption, but the ‘as opposed to’. Assuming that a focus on consumption is necessarily an individualising act gives too much to the economist account of consumption as an act of individual choice. If by contrast (as for example Princen and Conca both emphasise) consumption is always an act embedded in relation to community, family, friends, peers, work, and so on, then the politics of focusing on consumption is similarly not necessarily individualising and thus ‘apolitical’. I agree with Maniates that there is much environmentalist activism which is problematic here, notably the ‘10 steps to save the Earth’ strategy which he rightly criticises, but there are many ways of focusing on consumption which do not fall into this trap (as evidenced elsewhere in the book). For example, in Green arguments which take anti-consumerism seriously, accept its radicality in political terms, and regard it as part of a political strategy, it is thought of precisely as part of an attempt to reshape political institutions and outcomes. For example, Ted Trainer argues towards the end of Abandon Affluence! (1986) that refusal to buy a car and to organise lives around other forms of mobility is as much a political act to resist the power of car manufacturers as a simple act of environmental virtue – ‘the fact that General Motors have a larger intelligence organisation than Australia will yield it no power when most of us cycle or walk to work’ (Trainer 1985: 279). As Derek Wall puts it, reducing consumption is part of a strategy to ‘smash capitalism gently’ (1990: 82). But the gentleness of its action should not blind us that it is still tending towards (consciously or otherwise) smashing capitalism.

Conca (2001) has a rather different set of arguments about consumption. By contrast to the other approaches, he politicises consumption by connecting it to claims about globalisation. He argues that as globalisation heightens attention on consumption, but at the same time reduces the scope for traditional regulatory action by states in this field, because principally of flows of power backward and forward along global commodity chains. He argues first that ‘the biggest environmental dilemma of globalisation is the impact of consumption patterns in what he calls the planet’s ‘sustaining middle’, and that globalisation squeezes the middle income majority of the world’s population (by enriching some, impoverishing others) whose lifestyles are currently roughly sustainable (2001: 55). Second, he suggests that ‘changes in the organization of production and the scope and complexity of international transactions are making traditional regulatory approaches to global environmental protection increasingly ineffective. Power in global production systems has shifted both upstream and downstream from the factory floor’ (ibid). This could lead us to focus on new forms of political action by environmental groups, some of which target consumption. Conca argues that such shifts in strategy are needed. They do this of course in different ways – for example the contrasts between anti-sweatshops
activism, *Adbusters* and the Forest Stewardship Council, but all act, as Peter Newell shows very comprehensively, to fill the space created by the decline in regulatory activity by states and thus the opportunities to direct campaigns to state agencies, produced by neoliberal discourses surrounding globalisation (Newell 2000; 2000a).

This latter argument gets us part way to where I want to go. But not only do traditional political institutions fail to regulate either specific consumption patterns or the question of consumption per se, their basic structural imperative leads them to act to promote, shore up, reproduce, consumerism as an ideology and practice. Conca, Princen and Maniates do clearly acknowledge this in their overview piece (2001). They suggest that economistic assumptions in both the social sciences and policy-making arenas assume ‘a politics of growth that cuts across the political spectrum’ where ‘consumption is nothing less than the purpose of the economy’ (2001: 2). Later, they state that all stages involved in consumption decisions are ‘embedded at every step in social relations of power and authority’ (ibid: 5). But these important insights are not followed up as clearly as they might be in the individual pieces that follow, or in the outline they develop of key themes in studying consumption in GEP.\(^4\)[5] It is this argument which I will follow up and develop below.

Some of the literature in International Political Economy (IPE), particularly the recent resurgence of varieties of IPE with origins in the work of Marx and/or Gramsci can offer us some significant guidance here. If the problem for GEP is that we need to think of consumption as a structural imperative for capitalist societies, then frameworks which take this structural imperative as one of their basic starting points might be expected to be useful. But here again consumption is relatively neglected (also Conca, Princen & Maniates 2001: 4). The work of Gigi Herbert (1996; 2000) and of Leslie Sklair (1991; 2002) are two notable exceptions. Both show persuasively, if in rather different ways, how consumption and consumerism have become a central part of the legitimation of neoliberal globalisation in particular, and capitalist society more generally. Sklair refers to the ‘culture-ideology of consumerism’ as one of the three central pillars of his theory of the global system, the other two being the transnational corporation in the economic sphere, and the transnational capitalist class as a political force (2002), and argues that this operates both as the sphere of legitimation for capitalism, but also as a direct means through which accumulation is realised, acting to ‘speed up the circulation of material goods’ (1991: 75). He also suggests therefore that the ‘ideas that are antagonistic to the global capitalist project can be reduced to one central counter-hegemonic idea the rejection of the culture-ideology of consumerism itself. Without consumerism, the rationale for continuous capitalist accumulation dissolves’ (1991: 82). Herbert, engaging both in fuller empirical work on the transnational spread of advertising and consumer practices, and in more complex theoretical analysis of the role of

\(^{4}[5]\) These themes are: ‘the social embeddedness of consumption’ – a rejection of economistic reasoning about consumption as individual choice; ‘chains of material provisioning and resource use’ – a sort of commodity chains analysis; and ‘production as consumption’ – resisting a focus simply on consumption as ‘final use’.
consumption in reproducing neoliberal globalisation, shows how ‘in the re-articulation of the social subject that is written into the project of neoliberalism, the consumer is the privileged social subject’ (Herbert 2000: 6). She draws on historical analysis which shows that the emergence of modern consumerism in the early 20th century was one response to the underconsumptionist tendencies of laissez-faire capitalism (alongside the welfare state and ‘high wage capitalism’ exemplified by Ford’s 5 dollar day, and in many ways acting in response to the inadequacies of these strategies) (2000: 3-5). She shows also how since the characteristics of neoliberal globalisation in many ways reproduce these underconsumptionist tendencies (by exacerbating income inequalities severely while accelerating productivity and production gains), the fostering of consumerism through advertising, branding, and so on, serves again to bridge this gap (2000).

There are other moments where neo-Gramscian writers in IPE make allusions to the importance of consumption. Cox, for example, suggests that ‘consumption is the motor of capitalism and the motivation of consumer demand is indispensable to capitalism’s continuing development’ (1995; Herbert 2000: 3). In Kees van der Pijl’s *Transnational Classes and International Relations*, consumption is clearly regarded as an inherent part of cycles of commodification and thus crucial to capitalist reproduction, but is discusses principally in terms of its operation as the sphere of the magical in a secular age, and the aestheticisation of personal identity (1998: 12-13). Gill (1995) picks up the question of individual embedding in global capitalism, but through the development of consumer credit. Ability and aptitude for going into consumer debt is increasingly not only a means of gaining access to money to finance consumption, but also a marker of economic citizenship – a good credit rating (only available through taking out credit and paying it back successfully) is a precondition not only for access to substantial credit, such as a mortgage, but also at times for access to employment. Participation in the consumer economy via debt or credit however locks people into employment sufficient to maintain both particular debt repayments and also creditworthiness in general, and thus operates as one of the panoptic institutions crucial to reproducing capitalism (Gill 1995: 20-27, also 39).

Similarly, Neimann & Davies’ (2000) focus on everyday life, drawing on Lefebvre, entails a focus on consumption as an element of leisure, alongside family and work, as crucial (and neglected) elements in the reproduction of global capitalism.

But this still represents a relative neglect of consumption in this literature. There are two reasons for this neglect I think. One is either a particular conception of the ‘international’ which renders consumption invisible, since that is regarded to be the site of the local, the personal, everyday life, etc (also Niemann & Davies 2000). This is of course rather odd, given the exactly reversed assumption in the cultural studies literature on consumption where there is much on consumer culture and

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5[6] Also in writers working within other variants of Marxist-inspired IPE. Wallerstein, for example, writes that ‘the endless accumulation of capital requires as one of its mechanisms a collective orientation towards consumption’ (1990: 38). But as with most of the neo-Gramscian writers, the point is made, but never elaborated or developed. Without a explicit Marxist heritage, Scholte also emphasises consumption in his account of economic globalisation (Scholte 2000: 112-6).
globalisation (and on which more later). Waters for example suggests that ‘material exchanges localize; political exchanges internationalise; symbolic exchanges globalize’ (1995: 9). Consumption is in this conceptualisation therefore precisely the site of the most globalised set of practices, the site where shared identities are forged through the imagery and meanings of different products (Coke, Nike, McDonalds, etc being the usual suspects here).

The second reason for the neglect of consumption is the Marxian ontology of much IPE. Here, consumption is often thought of either as epiphenomena, simply unimportant in explaining the main dynamics of capitalist development, and/or, again, false consciousness, an abstraction from the ‘real’. If the principal motor of capitalist development is the efficiency of exploitation embedded in the wage-labour form, and the social and political conflict that results from such a class relation of production, then the acts of consumption are intrinsically unimportant from a political-economic point of view. And second, since the principal source of human identity – our ‘species-being’ in Marx’s terms, is derived from labour (see for example Marx 1844/1977: 66-74), then any attempt to ground identity in other practices such as consumptive ones is an ideological move which distracts from the effort to produce a society without alienated labour. Practices of consumption, in this language, may be regarded as passive acts to satisfy particular needs or wants, rather than the more active production of self (if alienated under capitalism) involved in labour.

There are clearly more fruitful ways in which consumption may be dealt with in Marxism, through for example a focus on the production-distribution-exchange cycles by which M becomes M’ – the whole process of commodification. There is much room in this aspect of Marx’s work to focus on consumption as part of this political-economic cycle, but there is as yet no work IPE which engages the subject this way (even in those works which do take Marx’s analysis of such processes in general as a starting point – for example van der Pijl 1998, the point is not developed).

There is of course an enormous set of literatures on consumption that I have so far ignored. In sociology, cultural studies, economic anthropology, cultural and economic geography, and cultural history (at least), there is massive amounts of

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6[7] I should perhaps emphasise the deliberate exclusion here of much North American IPE here – that which combines realist/liberal institutionalist IR with neo-classical economics – Gilpin, Krasner, Keohane and those following them. The first critique also applies to this school, but ultimately it is a completely different beast. Most fundamentally for the present purposes, that version of IPE does not consider part of its task to explain patterns of capital accumulation and the reproduction of capitalism, preferring to focus on the interaction of states and markets in the ‘international’ sphere.

7[8] Some of the IPE literature which does mention consumption also draws on this ‘false consciousness’ conception of consumption. Niemann and Davies, for example, drawing on Lefebvre, argue that ‘marketing is one of the crucial manners in which … the critique of everyday life in the form of leisure [is] recuperated for purposes of capital accumulation’ (2000: 24). Consumption develops out of the way that workers seek to compensate for alienation in the workplace through leisure activities, but is then channelled into consumption by a set of marketing and advertising practices. See also for example Gartman (1994) or Ling (1990) for expressions of this account of consumption. Van der Pijl’s account (1998: 12-13) of consumption as fetishism is similar in this respect.
work done which we might anticipate that there are resources to help us.\textsuperscript{8}\textsuperscript{9} Much of this work takes as one of its starting points the limits of a ‘false consciousness’ explanation of consumption practices.

But there is a completely different definition of consumption amongst these genres than in economic or ecological accounts. Instead of focusing largely on aggregate measures of consumption, which thus becomes an objectified ‘measure’, consumption is viewed largely from the point of view of individual and collective practices of consumption, focusing on the meanings of the things consumed for those consuming, and the identities produced through the act of consumption. Consumption is thus interpreted primarily in semiotic terms rather than in terms of the material flows embedded in and produced by specific consumption practices (also Conca, Princen & Maniates 2001: 4).\textsuperscript{9}\textsuperscript{10} This is enormously important in undermining the simplistic explanations of consumption based in either notions of false consciousness or in naturalised accounts of human ‘desire’, and in correcting a straightforward descriptive account of consumption as ‘total throughput’ which ultimately tells us very little about why this ‘throughput’ occurs.

This semiotic focus makes it rather hard to think either in terms of consumption and the reproduction of capitalist societies, or in terms of the material/ecological flows. Frequently, thinking of such questions is explicitly resisted in cultural studies, either to resist the totalising claims of Marxism or the objectivist underpinnings of much ecological writing on consumption, but most often because such accounts are associated with critical accounts of (mass) consumer culture developed both by conservative elitists and the Frankfurt School which are regarded to significantly underplay the agency, tensions, contradictions, possibilities of consumption practices in favour of a model which regards (mass) consumption as social degeneration or as a straightforward expression of social domination (e.g. Parker 1998, others).

\textsuperscript{8}\textsuperscript{9} I cannot begin to do anything more than provide a selection of works here. In Cultural Studies, see Lury (1996). In Sociology, see Warde (1997) or Beardsworth & Keil (1997). In cultural geography see Bell & Valentine (1997) In cultural history, see Daunton & Hilton (2001). For an interdisciplinary collection, see Miller (1995).

\textsuperscript{9}\textsuperscript{10} Conca, Princen and Maniates make the point that social/cultural analyses of consumption eschew questions about the ecology of consumption. They miss however the definitional difference between their account of consumption as aggregate throughput, and that of most working in sociology or cultural studies. Tucker (2002: 178) suggests that a number of social/cultural theorists do make the point that their discipline is similarly blind to ecological connections (he cites Appadurai 1986; Howes 1996; Miller 1995 among others). It is difficult to see how Tucker interprets these works in this way. Occasionally, ‘nature’ is present, but the focus is usually there on how ‘nature’ is used to sell products or how it is constructed in consumerist discourses. For example in Howes it is dealt with as an element in cross-cultural consumption – part of ‘consuming the other’, with only a bare mention of Alan Durning of the Worldwatch Institute question consumption levels, a mention which is left entirely hanging (p.192). Nowhere is a properly ecological focus on the material throughputs embedded in consumption reflected on. In a similar work, Franklin, Lury and Stacey (2000), where environmental destruction appears is precisely in order to interrogate the concept of nature itself. Interrogated (perfectly reasonably) to resist the essentialisation of ‘nature’ and to talk about nature as a produced object, the materiality of specific destructions is (perhaps inadvertently) then sidelined.
But what is crucial here both for IPE and for GEP is precisely that the attempt to explain patterns of individual and collective practices needs to be connected to its political-economic context and effects and to its socio-ecological consequences. And there is little in terms of resources in the Cultural Studies and related literatures on consumption which helps us to do this.

What I want to show in what follows is that both in relation to IPE and in relation to GEP, we have to take consumption much more seriously. Consumption has to be understood as a central part of the reproduction of contemporary capitalism, and cannot be reduced either to epiphenomena or false consciousness. As a consequence, and while consumption and consumerism are central drivers of environmental degradation, to confront them is thus to challenge the whole basis of capitalist society, and a deeply hostile political response can be expected by what Kees van der Pijl (1998) and others usefully term the ‘transnational capitalist class’ – including the state managers in the leading capitalist states. I want to develop this account by starting with two recent instances where consumption and politics have been deeply interwoven, to bring out some of these points, and will then develop the argument in more general terms.

**Mondeo Man and the fuel protests: the consumerisation of citizenship**

During the run-up to, and aftermath of, the 1997 general election in the UK, most of the principal signifiers of different sorts of voter, were defined through their relationship to particular cars. An aphorism was repeated throughout the press concerning Tony Blair’s self-understanding of New Labour’s journey, to become part of the campaign’s mythology. In campaigning during the 1992 general election, Blair canvassed a man in Telford who told him frankly why he was voting Tory. In a speech to the Labour Annual conference in October 1996, Blair draws out his implications from the encounter thus:

> I can vividly recall the exact moment that I knew the last election was lost … I was canvassing in the Midlands, on an ordinary, suburban estate. I met a man polishing his Ford Sierra. He was a self-employed electrician. His Dad voted Labour, he said. He used to vote Labour, too. But he’d bought his own house now. He’d set up his own business. He was doing very nicely. “So I’ve become a Tory’, he said. He wasn’t rich. But he was doing better than he [presumably his dad] did, and as far as he was concerned, being better off meant being Tory too.

In that moment, he crystallised for me the basis of our failure, the reason why a whole generation has grown up under the Tories. People judge us on their instincts about what they believe our instincts to be. And that man polishing his car was clear. His instincts were to get on in life. And he thought our instincts were to stop him. (Blair, as quoted in the *Daily Mail*, October 3 1996, p.3)\[10][11]

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10[11] For other newspaper accounts of this story and its role in legitimising Labour’s political shifts, see for example Haynes & Leake 1996; Grice 1997.
It started then with Sierra Man, with a mythology of New Labour’s journey to the 1997 election by its leader told through a focus on a particular type of voter who is defined by the make and model of car they own. But this is no empty signifier. It is not simply that a particular car can be used to create images of people with particular class and gender positions from which their voting practices can be read, but that these voting practices themselves arise to a significant extent out of their orientation to consumption in general, and specifically to cars and the freedoms they (allegedly) provide. Sierra Man is someone who votes as a car driver.

During the run up to the 1997 election, these car based signifiers then multiplied. Blair is reported as saying a week before the election that he was convinced he would win when he saw ‘obviously well-to-do people in new cars’ supporting Labour (Woods and Nuki 1997). Having perceived that they had successfully captured Sierra Man, they turned their attention to ‘Galaxy Man’ (e.g. Woods & Nuki 1997). ‘Mondeo Man’ also gets an occasional look in, and some other mentions prior to 1997 (e.g Massey 1996; Clarkson 1996), but these references have no direct connection to the election. There are a couple of fairly weak references in the run up to the election (Guardian 1997; Cohen 1997), but as a political signifier, Mondeo Man comes into his own a year or two later, and then becomes hegemonic as the signifier of Labour’s target voter. Then, after the election, the new Tory leader William Hague continues the identification of key voters with cars. He is told by a taxi driver on the way from Newcastle upon Tyne to the airport that he will not vote Tory again, having voted Tory for much of his life. ‘We have to win over that taxi driver and millions like him’ (Hastings 1997).

At one level, this set of connections between cars and voting patterns could be taken as simply a byword for a particular psephological category. Colin Hay thus uses the phrase as a synonym for the median voter as outlined in theories of electoral behaviour (1999: 97). It is thus used, both by Hay and other commentators on New Labour, and in general political usage, to signify a certain political-economic location - C2 floating voter, ‘middle England’ - and thus a position along left-right

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11[12] The references are usually to the class and geographical connections to particular car ownerships, but the specific positions of the Mondeo are not agreed on, despite its clear intent when it becomes a political signifier. Writing in the Daily Mail, Massey (1996) suggests its home is in the North, where people are fans of ‘traditional and thrifty models’. Another article in the Mail (October 22 1996, p.16) is a rather different image suggesting that the archetypal Mondeo driver ‘is a regional sales manager and lives in Milton Keynes or another new town with his wife and two children.’

12[13] The Guardian’s ‘Pass notes’ column on 29 April 1997, 2 days before the election, was on Galaxy Man, and suggests that ‘Tony Blair has decided that Sierra Man and Mondeo Man are in the bag; the target for the last week of the campaigning is Galaxy Man’. Cohen has a different target, and suggests that ‘Mondeo Man is the real threat to John Major’s Arcadia’, principally reading this to mean that the ‘middle England’ voter who is synonymous with Mondeo Man, may defect in sufficient numbers to the anti-European Referendum Party to cause Conservative candidates to lose to Labour.

13[14] I pick on Colin Hay in part because his book is the best I have read on New Labour, but also because he has written a couple of extremely incisive pieces on environmental politics (1994; 1996) which are entirely neglected in his more ‘straight’ political-economic work.
continuum. In Hay’s book, the phrase appears in the middle of a discussion of the application of Downs’ economic theory of democracy to New Labour’s modernisation – the moving of Labour to the political middle or even to the right of centre.

But at the same time, it also can be used to signify how certain consumptive practices are privileged in political discourse. The invocation of median voter theory tells us nothing about the question Why cars? Why were cars used to describe this category of voter in the run-up to the 1997 election? The signifying capacity of cars was used in political debate in relation to class, gender and overtly political subject positions. A political middle defined by the ownership of a (particular brand of) car reflects the privileging of car drivers as a group and car use as a mode of consumption and (im)mobility. Thus at the same time that New Labour has done the things Hay says in terms of moving to the right politically, it also has done so connecting certain forms of political identity to certain forms of consumptive identity, and thus to certain forms of socio-ecological practice.

It is no accident that Sierra/Galaxy/Mondeo Man appeared as political signifiers (I will simply use Mondeo Man from now on for convenience), after several years of sustained, radical political activism centred on the social and ecological destruction wrought by a car-dominated society. The roads protests, stimulated by the ‘roads for prosperity’ programme announced by the Conservative government in 1989 as well as a generational shift with a new generation of activists which regarded the 1970s generation of environmentalist organisations (principally Greenpeace and FoE) as having professionalised and lost their radical edge, provided one of the key controversies of the early-mid 1990s. This conflict continued right up to election time, when the A30 protests provided the movement with one of its best-known celebrities, ‘Swampy’. At the same time, another form of activism emerged around Reclaim the Streets. This arose (in part) out of the roads protests in East London over the M11 link road, and broadened out the protests to be about car culture in general, not simply road building. RTS held parties, closing down urban streets to provide a vision of an alternative urban world.

14[15] Journalist commentators on the 1997 election frequently refer back to the 1980s and Thatcher’s invocation of such electoral categories. For them, the 1980s equivalent was ‘Essex man’ (e.g. Deans 1997), and in the 1992 election there was the phenomenon of ‘Basildon man’, referring to the key Labour target constituency of Basildon in Essex which the Conservatives famously won. My preferred equivalent category for that era would be Ian Dury’s ‘Billericay Dickie’, complete with the appropriate class and aspirational connotations – ‘I’m not a blinkin’ thickie, I’m Billericay Dickie, and I’m doing very well’ (Dury 1977) Billericay Dickie, of course, drives a Ford Cortina, the forerunner of the Sierra.

15[16] There are of course a set of other questions which in other contexts would receive more emphasis. Why the Mondeo? Why ‘Man’? This would takes us in the direction of the gender and class dimensions of the electoral category and its chosen signifier. We could also speculate on the choosing of a car which signifies ‘the world’ – Ford’s attempt to revive the world car project (a car to be manufactured the same everywhere – except in North America) abandoned by most manufacturer in the mid-1980s. For the present purposes however, it is the simpler question of ‘why cars?’ which occupies me.

There were other, more ‘mainstream’ contestations of cars also during the 1990s. The Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (RCEP) produced a report about the impact of urban air pollution from cars on health (Robinson 2000: 207). The Standing Advisory Committee on Trunk Road Assessments (SACTRA) put the nail in the coffin on road building in technical terms by demonstrating how road building merely created extra traffic (ibid: 207-8). And there were numerous moral panics, confirmed by the daily experience of it for many, about the ‘school run’ which provided routine confirmation that ‘the car’ was one of the main problems society faced.

Enter Mondeo Man, stage right. Mondeo Man operated as discursive reframing. Rather than seeing cars as ‘the problem’, they become seen the source of identity through which a subjects political identity is understood. The legitimacy of car driving is recuperated and ‘normal’ politics is resumed.

Of course, once put into practice, the problems created for transport policy of such a framing have been serious. As Andy Jordan notes, ‘Much to his (Prescott’s) annoyance, Blair has intervened on more than one occasion to pacify the anxious car drivers of Middle England, personified by the archetypal “Mondeo Man” who bore him to power in 1997’(Jordan 2000: 270). Having legitimised car driving, it then became more difficult to engage in the ‘attacks’ on car drivers widely believed to be necessary to achieve other goals in terms of congestion or meeting emissions targets. We could go on about many specific examples, but I will take this point up in relation to the fuel protests.

In September-November 2000, there were a series of protests about fuel tax rates. In September, these brought the country to a standstill as oil tanker drivers refused to cross ‘picket’ lines of farmers and lorry drivers who had initially blockaded, but quickly withdrawn to a picket protest, protesting about the high price of fuel. Very quickly, petrol stations ran out of fuel, stimulating (and stimulated by) panic buying and a widespread sense of crisis. [17][18]

At one level, this was then thus a protest involving farmers (especially North Welsh hill farmers) and lorry drivers attempting to defend their livelihoods/interests. But it depended politically for its success on a sense of widespread support. This was articulated throughout the newspapers, providing images of stoical car drivers in petrol queues, supporting the protests despite the inconvenience under the pretext of a ‘need’ to pressurise the government over fuel tax rates. This then for most people was the expression of a consumerist articulation of interests (as opposed to both a producerist articulation, and to an articulation as ‘citizen’).

[17][18] For a general review and explanation of these protests, see Doherty, Paterson, Plows and Wall (2003); Robinson (2002).
This crisis in late 2000 was thus brought about at least in part by the discursive reframing of political interests involved in the ‘Mondeo man’ discourse three years earlier. Having framed the question of political identity in terms of an orientation to consumer interests or identities, New Labour then got its comeuppance.

**September 11th: consumerist geopolitics**

Consider the following. One of the main responses to the September 11th atrocities was the urge to Americans to consume. Amongst the outpourings of emotion, the revanchism, the multiple forms of political response to these events, a central anxiety of political and economic elites was that they would tip over the American economy into recession.\(^{18[19]}\) The economy was already faltering, it was suggested - the Federal Reserve had already cut interest rates a number of times in the previous months (e.g. Stewart 2001; Birger 2002) in an ongoing effort to get individuals and firms to buy more stuff - and these events could tip the balance over towards recession.\(^{19[20]}\)

In response, from George W Bush down, politicians and corporate elites, urged Americans (and, through advertising abroad, such as that by American Airlines or for that matter British Airways) to fly.\(^{20[21]}\) Americans were urged to engage in the action which had immediately become so symbolically overloaded, meaning that the act of buying an air ticket became an act of resistance against what at that point were still an unspecified set of terrorists. But flying is simultaneously the most ecologically overloaded act of consumption which exemplifies the unsustainability of (American) corporate-consumer capitalism.

Alongside specific exhortations to continue flying, there was a more general urge to consume. Interest rates were reduced to the point where real interest rates were negative. Firms engaged in campaigns to keep people consuming. GM for example were the first car manufacturer in the US to introduce zero percent financing after September 11th, and ran a campaign called ‘Keep America Rolling’ which involved ‘an unabashed appeal to the patriotism of US consumers’ (Teather 2002). Economic analysts and commentators stated regularly that ‘the response of US consumers was

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\(^{18[19]}\) And of course the world economy, although US elites are notoriously parochial when it comes to making that connection.

\(^{19[20]}\) This also makes apposite Princen et al’s point about production also itself involving consumption directly. The cuts in interest rates were designed both to get final consumers to buy more but also firms to buy more stock and invest in new plant, and so on – to engage in consumptive acts which would increase their own productivity but more importantly would improve the viability of other firms from which they buy. On the weaknesses of the US economy before September 11th, also providing evidence for the claim about the role consumption is presumed to play in promoting growth, see Baker (2001a), or Economist (2001).

\(^{20[21]}\) American Airlines engaged in an advertising campaign in which it acted essentially as the American Tourist Board, promoting travel to the US in general. More negatively, British Airways produced a series of adverts suggesting that if you (a corporate executive) wouldn’t travel to meet your potential client, then your rival would. In the aftermath of September 11th, there were numerous suggestions that executives were conducting more business online and by phone.
the key to sustaining the US economic in the wake of the attack’ (Stewart 2001). The response to September 11th serves in this sense to underscore that what America is a space where consumption has become a moral act. As Naomi Klein has put it, ‘When US politicians urge their citizens to fight terrorism by shopping, it is about more than feeding an ailing economy. It's about once again wrapping the day-to-day in the mythic’ (Klein 2002).

It also can be read to say how this spectacularly consumption oriented economy (America should be read here only as the hyperbolic exemplification of a more general global economic form) is both fragile as it involves technologies which are (perhaps increasingly) vulnerable to attack. Predicated on exceptional mobility and flexibility, such an economy creates numerous points at which its opponents can undermine it.

But this official reading of the vulnerability of 'freedom-loving peoples' to attack obscures the way in which the materiality of the economy is implicated in the production of these dangers in the first place. At least a part of the background conditions for this global conflict between 'America' and 'evil' are the political practices necessary to secure the most basic of conditions for the practices 'enjoyed' by the 'freedom-loving peoples', namely car driving. The history of US oil imperialism in the Middle East is a part of the long-term conditions (along perhaps most strongly with US support for Israel and a more general sense of coca-colonialism) under which resentments of US power in the region have proliferated. That these have been attached politically to a particularly militant form of Islam is not the central point; at its root this is a political conflict over the right of the most powerful states to intervene on a daily level in the lives of 'other' societies to secure access to the material conditions (oil) for their practices embodying their status as a 'freedom loving people'. I like then to call this a 'consumerist geopolitics'.

It matters little whether the central motive of the US state has been to control access to the pipelines to be developed flowing from the Uzbek and Kazak oil and gas fields, although it seems clear that at least once military action in Afghanistan was contemplated, such questions certainly figured in the strategic mindset (Gokay 2002). What is more important is the origins of the resentments of US power in the region. While these can be traced back to 1951 (at least) if we want to, the crucial immediate origin is the presence of US troops in Saudi Arabia, to secure 'stability' in the region, which should be read as stability in oil markets. So even without conspiracy theories (or other sorts of explanation) about Afghan oil pipelines, the 'need' to secure the prerequisites of Ford Excursions (or even Ford Taurus') lies at the root of the present conflict.

21[22] Of course, one of the central dynamics here is exactly what Beck describes as the dynamic of world risk society (1999). As the search for control, which began in earlier phases of modernity, proceeds, in risk society this ceases to actually effect control but merely creates new and proliferating dangers.
The other problem with an ‘oil imperialism’ argument (e.g. Gokay 2002; Angel 2001) is that it ultimately fetishizes the commodity of oil. What is ultimately at stake is a particular social form through which that commodity acquires value and meaning. As Niemann and Davies argue in relation to nationalist reactions to globalisation, ‘consumption and leisure plays a significant role here in that access to an undisturbed consumption of commodities constitutes a singularly dominant theme in this reassertion of bounded space’ (2000: 16). It is the particular values attached to car-dominated societies (especially but by no means solely in the US) – suburbanism, a particular set of meanings around ‘freedom’, hyper-individualism, and so on. What September 11th reveals then is the depth of interconnections between a set of pathological geopolitical dynamics and the patterns underlying environmental degradation.

In terms of consumption, however, what this also shows is that consumption-oriented economy needs to be secured politically. If consumption drives growth, then intervention is needed to make sure that rates of increases in consumption levels are adequate to keep growth going.

**Consumption and the reproduction of global capitalism**

From the above we get a number of points about consumption and GEP/IPE. From September 11th and its aftermath, I draw two principal conclusions. On the one hand, the high levels of consumption embedded in the contemporary global economy can be regarded as helping to generate significant geopolitical instability. On the other hand, private consumption, especially of those commodities in which the production of such instability is manifested, is something that generates great anxiety amongst political and economic elites, precisely since it is regarded as a driver of economic growth. At the same time, private consumption practices become embedded not only in individual identities, but in political identities, shaping the possibilities of particular sorts of state intervention, as seen in the case of Mondeo Man and the fuel protests. I want now to develop these points to make some more general arguments about consumption in contemporary capitalism.

Official discourses surrounding political economy amongst political-economic elites suggest an understanding of growth that is crudely consumption-driven (see also Princen, Maniates & Conca 2002: 325-6, or Bauman 1998: 26-7). This is especially clear since September 11th, but had been coming clear before that. Elites understand the problem of growth, especially in relation to short-term cycles, as one of about stimulating consumption patterns. As Bauman puts it, “Economic growth”, the

22 Later, discussing the Gulf War of 1990-1, they assert similarly that ‘the whole of global political economy can be read in this everyday activity of driving an SUV: securing oil supplies, financing consumption with debt, th technology to move people and goods quickly and over distance and terrain, the reluctance of North American consumers to compromise their lifestyles for either environmental protection or to divert economic resources to the execution of militarily strategic efforts, etc’ (Niemann & Davies 2000: 25.
main modern measure of things being normal and in good order ... is seen in the consumer society as dependent not so much on the “productive strength of the nation” ... as on the zest and vigour of its consumers’ (1998: 26-7).

Take for example chair of the Federal Reserve Alan Greenspan’s testimony to Congress in February 2002, for example (Greenspan 2002). Greenspan’s account of the way that the US government intervened economically after September 11th is premised largely on such a consumption-driven assumption concerning growth. He focuses on how interest rates were reduced ‘to extraordinarily low levels’, to provide a ‘monetary stimulus’. The assessment of the state of the recovery is couched in terms of consumption. ‘As the fourth quarter progresses, business and consumer confidence recovered, no doubt buoyed by successes in the war on terrorism. The improved sentiment seemed to buffer the decline in economic activity’. He then continues ‘But that impetus to the growth of activity will be short-lived unless sustained increases in final demand kick in before the positive effects of the swing from inventory liquidation dissipate. Most recoveries in the post-World War II period received a boost from a rebound in demand for consumer durables and housing ... ’. In other words, not only do firms have to buy more inventory to keep other firms going, individual consumers have to buy more stuff to keep all firms going. The historical reference shows this is not conceived of as a one-off, but a general assumption about how economic growth is to be pursued, especially in the context of real or potential recessions. Finally, the specific consumption patterns concerning cars are regarded as particularly important in Greenspans’ account. ‘Consumer spending received a considerable lift from the sales of new motor vehicles which were remarkably strong in October and November owing to major financing initiatives’. These are those such as GM’s zero percent finance deals mentioned above. Privatized demand management occurs not only through state institutions but large corporations with disproportionate interest in the success of the economy as a whole, just as part of the emergence of Fordism-welfare capitalism involved increases in wages by similarly positioned corporations, in that case Ford.23[24]

In relation to September 11th, this is made especially clear if we consider the other crises in and/or of the US of 2001. The California energy crisis (especially in its dominant interpretation by Bush and Cheney), the development of the National Energy Strategy by Cheney, and the articulations made by Bush surrounding the US’s pull-out of the Kyoto treaty, all help to reveal that the fundamental presupposition of US elites in particular was the requirement for increasing consumption. Outside formal policy-making circles also, such an assumption is also clear. GM’s campaign to get people buying more cars after September 11th was expressly designed to shore up economic growth – in the words of GM’s CEO

23[24] Similar assessments can be seen in for example publications by the IMF or the Conference Board, one of the main research and analysis bodies of the transnational capitalist class (IMF 2001; Conference Board 2001). The Conference Board, in a report published on September 19th, couches the possibility of recovery almost entirely in terms of what happens to ‘consumer confidence’ (e.g. pp. 4-5), while consumer and business confidence is also the principal determinant of the economic response as far as the IMF is concerned, even though their analysis is more wide-ranging.
Richard Wagoner ‘it is consumers that have really driven the turnaround (in economic prospects after September 11\textsuperscript{th})’ (quoted in Teather 2002; see also Lim 2002).

They can and of course articulate more sophisticated accounts of growth. Whether understood explicitly in terms of a particular model (as in Gordon Brown’s famous invocation of ‘post-neoclassical endogenous growth theory’) or in terms of specific drivers of growth (productivity, deregulation, etc), state managers can clearly come up with such conceptualisations. But on the level of day to day economic management and discourse, the aspect of state policy which is regarded as key is interest rates, with (in the US especially) income tax rates a close second.\textsuperscript{24,25} If growth rates are slowing, interest rates are reduced to stimulate spending. If inflation is rising, interest rates are increased to prevent ‘overheating’. This is then an inverted form of Keynesian demand-management, where instead of increasing public consumption to stimulate growth, the state acts to create incentives to increase private consumption. Neoliberalism may have made public works unfashionable, but demand management remains.\textsuperscript{25,26}

The origins of this consumption-driven conception of growth are in part in the neoliberal project from the late 1970s onwards (also Helleiner 2002: 255).\textsuperscript{26,27} This project emphasised a discourse of consumer sovereignty for initially political reasons. The intention was to encourage an orientation to both the economy and to politics where people were encouraged to focus on their ‘freedom’ as consumers rather than workplace politics. In part reflects a well-understood shift in such orientations. These are usually accounted for either in terms of a shift from an ‘economy of goods’ to an ‘economy of signs’ (Lash & Urry 1994; Waters 1995: 53), from a ‘society of the factory’ to a ‘society of the spectacle’ where dominant identities are oriented around consumption instead of around work (Debord 1970, as summarised in Hilton & Daunton; also Waters 1995; 15-6), or a shift from a ‘work ethic’ to a ‘consumerist

\textsuperscript{24,25} Introducing the ‘Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation’ Act of 2001, Bush claimed that it was aimed at ‘helping to strengthen our economy by giving Americans more money to spend’. (White House 2001). In the US more than elsewhere, a growth discourse is intertwined more with a hyper-individualist discourse about ‘individual rights against big government’, hence more emphasis in the US than elsewhere on lowering tax rates.

\textsuperscript{25,26} In the US at least, this conception crosses political boundaries. The centre left Campaign for America’s future agreed with the imperative of stimulating consumption to promote growth in the aftermath of September 11\textsuperscript{th}, but merely differed in arguing that the tax cuts should be highly progressive in orientation. In addition to making a social justice point here, they also argue that targeting tax cuts at the poor would have a greater effect in promoting consumption and thus growth. ‘Giving Bill Gates another $1 million is unlikely to affect his consumption. Giving a poor family $1000 will affect their consumption’, they argued (Baker 2001). Of course, if one takes the ecological critique seriously, then this is a particularly stark example of what gets sometimes called the ‘fair shares in extinction’ argument. It also serves to underscore, as Princen et al and others also suggest, that the centre left’s arguments for growth operate frequently to displace arguments for serious redistribution of wealth.

\textsuperscript{26,27} It can be regarded to have a far longer history of course. Some for example suggest that the industrial revolution was set off by an explosion of consumption in eighteenth century England (for example McKendrick et al 1982, a cited in Tucker 2002: 180). Certainly the consumption-led growth conception was also present in political-economic discourse at that time, notably in Adam Smith.
aesthetic’, as suggested by Bauman (1998: ch. 2). But this shift has also been (and still is) a political project, to legitimise clampdown on worker rights (among other things). In the UK, for example, it was this new consumerism which helped to legitimise the assault on organised labour in the early 1980s (e.g. Gamble 1988: 214-5).

This neoliberal conception of a consumerist orientation to politics is now in most countries hegemonic. But at least three political consequences have occurred, shaping both hegemonic politics and helping to produce new forms of political activity.

First, there is a contradiction emerges in the neoliberal articulation. As a consumerist understanding of growth increasingly predominates, consumption practices take on political meanings and politicians therefore attempt to (re)produce and shape consumer subjectivities. The response to September 11th is a paradigm case here. The US state has acted both to promote consumption in general and specific consumption patterns. And elites suggest that as the globalisation and liberalisation of the economy proceeds, as it becomes more like the archetypes of (hyper)liberalism, where consumer sovereignty is held up as actual reality rather than ideal type, the importance of shaping consumers is ever more important to secure the general condition of accumulation on which not only all economic actors depend but also on which politicians depend for legitimisation. This involves not simply technical activities creating incentives to consume, for example by reducing interest rates. Contra the standard neoliberal argument about consumption as a realm of freedom, therefore, echoed by some critics such as Bauman (1998: 29-31), it involves the emergence of a full-blown consumer governmentality. Lester Thurow, MIT economist and globalisation booster, told Democrat Senators in 1999 that ‘consumers could be “re-engineered” to dispose them to consume more’ (Rowe 2001). George Bush is alleged to have referred directly to a ‘patriotic duty to consume’ and such articulations of the connection between consumption and patriotism are ubiquitous. ‘“You know what I did today? I did my duty as an American. I bought stock,” said retired Marine officer Calvin Frantz of Fairfax, Va.’ (Veith & Gosselin 2001). Of course, neoliberal discourse attempts to maintain a position that consumption is the realm of individual freedom, but the state simultaneously intervenes to promote particular consumption patterns and consumption in general,

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27[28] The power of this ideology has had a clear effect on consumption/environment debates. Murphy and Michaelis (forthcoming) for example suggest that one of the main obstacles to pursuing sustainable consumption is ‘the idea of the neutral state. This places significant limits on intervention by a public authority into the consumption practices of individuals.’ That this is simply an ideological construct – state routinely intervene in specific consumption decisions all the time (from criminalisation of specific objects of consumption such as drugs, via age limits on particular types of consumption, to generalised restrictions such as sales taxes) is missed entirely as neoliberal rhetoric is taken at face value.

28[29] It is not possible to find a direct quote from Bush saying this, but the phrase appears throughout 2001 in numerous articles, such as ‘Your patriotic duty to consume’ (McFeatters 2001) in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, shortly before September 11th. Former Labor Secretary and globalisation booster Robert Reich also weighed in, arguing ‘it does almost no good to tell consumers it’s their patriotic duty to consume more. People are deep in debt. They’re worried about their jobs’ (quoted in Veith & Gosselin 2001).
and overlays the freedom discourse with a discourse about duty, responsibility, nation, etc.\textsuperscript{29,30}

Second, consumption becomes politicised in another direction also. The 1990s has seen the rise of a whole variety of consumer activism. This reflects a number of developments. Notably, it reflects the (perceived or ‘real’) failure of older forms of social-democratic political action, the shift to consumer identities, a response to the way in which political elites politicise consumption as duty, precisely to the sense that it is principally through consumption that individuals are tied in to a globalising economy, with its ecological consequences and social injustices. Two broad sorts of new consumer politics have arisen as a result. On the one hand, fair trade movements, ethical/green consumer movements, ecolabelling projects (FSC), anti-sweatshops groups etc., have arisen. The involve making consumption take on the act of attempting to shape political outcomes where traditional forms of politics are seen to have failed, or at least to be insufficient in contemporary conditions (Scammell2000).\textsuperscript{30,31} But there is also the Naomi Klein, \textit{Adbusters} variety of consumer activism, which have clear connections to the global justice/environmental consciousness variety, but the emphasis is much on an argument that consumer societies are increasingly experienced by many as a form of domination rather than of freedom (e.g. Bordwell 2002; Purkis 2000; Klein 2000; Lasn 1999). Consumer politics thus is about re shaping individual and collective subjectivities away from consumption and status competition.

Third, the connections between consumption and politics work the other way also. While consumption is politicised, politics is simultaneously consumerised (also Princen, Maniates & Conca 2002: 319-20). Political identities are experienced as consumer identities. This is in part an inheritance of a long-standing tradition that

\textsuperscript{29,30}This of course has its corollary in the standard neoclassical economic argument concerning consumer sovereignty – that the act of consumption is simply to be regarded as the pursuit of individual preferences arising from processes of preference formation which are thought to be beyond legitimate interrogation. It does without saying that I, like many (e.g. Princen, Maniates & Conca 2002: 321-6), reject this account, but my purpose here is in any case to focus on its political manifestations rather than the academic debates underpinning them.

\textsuperscript{30,31}I do not want to get too bogged down in arguments around novelty, but a broad distinction between a consumer politics from the 1950s and 60s which was principally about protection of consumers from unaccountable and powerful corporations (Nader’s \textit{Unsafe at Any Speed}, 1965, is the standard citation here), and a new consumerist politics of attempting to shape broad patterns of political-economic outcomes through consumer action such as boycotts or fair trade practices, seems legitimate. This largely reflects a distinction made by Hilton and Daunton (2001) between a ‘politics of material culture’ and a ‘material culture of politics’. As they show, both types of consumer politics have been present for over two hundred years. Perhaps the earliest example of the latter type of activism they mention was the boycotting of sugar in the late eighteenth century to protest against slavery (ibid: 12). I think it legitimate to claim that this second type of activism is on the rise, but also it is becoming more generalised. They suggest the material culture of politics refers to ‘relating to specific acts of purchasing, the political meanings attached to a particular commodity and the political struggles involved in single-issue campaigns which often become focused through acts of consumption’ (ibid). This misses I think the contemporary articulation by a range of activists of using consumption politics to shape a broad set of outcomes, not limited to specific commodities (although occasionally crystallising round such specific commodities or brands – Nike, McDonalds, etc).
individuals act politically out of their own self-interest, a tradition going back at least to Hobbes, more recently celebrated in public choice theory. But it is a specific variant of that form of politics. As self-interest is increasingly understood in terms of the ability to exercise consumer ‘rights’, both in general and in relation to specific consumption practices, the attachments to these consumption practices informs and produces political action. Mondeo Man, the fuel protests, and the consumerist geopolitics of September 11th amply illustrate this point. Discourses surrounding what count as appropriate or legitimate political activity (fuel tax rates, overseas intervention) are shaped by the imperatives of specific consumption practices. And the act of producing legitimacy for certain political actions is understood as a marketing problem. Charlotte Rees, Undersecretary of State, suggested on 15th October 2002 that ‘we have to redefine what America is. This is the most sophisticated brand assignment I’ve ever had’ (quoted in Adbusters Jan/Feb 2002). As a number of people have recently suggested, the terrorist attack has itself succumbed to consumerist logic, with the brand ‘9/11’ operating as a signifier much in the same way as a Nike swoosh (e.g. Tristam 2002).

The other element in this development is the articulation in much neoliberal discourse of markets and consumption as more inherently ‘democratic’ than governments. ‘Since democracy “does not work”, one has to rely on consumers “voting with their purse” to know what the public really wants’ (Palan 1999: 66, quoting Mintz & Cohen 1976).

By way of conclusions

On the basis of the above, it seems clear to me that consumption operates as a key legitimising sphere for contemporary capitalism. It is the means in effect through which the practices of political-economic actors, from national governments, to TNCs, to multilateral institutions, are rendered legitimate. In this sense it is therefore crucial to the reproduction of contemporary capitalism.

It is also articulated by elites as a driver of growth (at least in terms of short-term cycles). I am unconvinced this is adequately critiqued as simply an ideological device to obscure the ‘real’ origins of growth, as would be commonplace in Marxist political economy. Wage-labour relations may serve well as a central explanation of capitalist dynamism in general. But there are a number of insufficiencies in this explanation. First, as is made clear by the enormous literature in cultural studies and sociology, an explanation of consumption practices which regards them as displacement from alienation in the workplace or purely produced by the discursive power of capital is inadequate. Second, specific cycles of growth and recession are clearly managed

31[32] For more general arguments suggesting that states increasingly borrow from the logic of branding, see Kunkle & Khoury (2002), or van Ham (2001).
32[33] This account of markets as more superior than democracy is particularly well exposed by Thomas Frank in One Market under God (2001).
33[34] Works which continue to operate with such an explanation include, for example in my immediate field concerning cars, David Gartman’s Auto Opium (1994), or Peter Ling’s America and the Automobile (1990).
by the multiple governance practices now operating in global capitalism through mechanisms designed to promote or restrain consumption in general, and specific consumption practices in particular. Third, more generally, the credit-driven nature of contemporary capitalism reinforces the importance of consumption. Levels of personal, corporate, and state debt have consistently risen. Some of this is to finance investment, but much is about financing consumption, and this consumption-credit connection is a key source of growth in contemporary economies. Fourth, consumption shapes the particular character of growth, directing economies towards particular sectors of growth. Particularly importantly for my purposes, consumption thus shapes the ecological consequences of capitalism. Tucker (2002) gives a very useful set of specific examples of this – showing for example how consumer practices in the US regarding bananas, coffee and mahagony have shaped the ecologies in producer countries.  

Finally, elite discourses actually manage to combine the two meanings of consumption discussed above. Consumption is regarded simultaneously as an aggregate measure denoting the material/monetary throughput of the economy, and as a set of individual/collective practices that give meaning to social life. The latter is thus understood as a driver of the former, in a combination going back to (at least) the articulations in the 1920s and 1930s by the architects of Public Relations (Edward Bernays et al). It is ironic perhaps that this combination is achieved more effectively than in much academic literature. Of course the combination is used for particular political effects, and relies rhetorically usually on naturalised accounts of consumption (see in particular statements by Bush and Cheney surrounding cars and energy use in 2001), and in explanatory terms on overly psychologistic and essentialist understandings of consumers’ agency (Bernays was after all Freud’s nephew). But nevertheless, at a general level, it is not necessary to assume such explanations, or the opposites provided by the critics of consumerism who focus on PR and advertising (Stuart Ewen’s Captains of Consciousness [1975] is the standard target here) using notions of false consciousness, to make the claim that individual consumption practices are part of the explanation of the growth in total throughput.

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34[35] One example I think is illustrative here is the recent development of a whole set of intensified consumption practices surrounding decorating, gardening and cooking. Decorating time-cycles are currently in the UK now around 2-3 years per room, whereas a generation ago they were 10-15 years. Spending on gardening has grown in the UK at 18% a year in the late 1990s and into the 2000s (Vidal 2002). There is a well-publicised genre of TV shows around these themes, helping to (re)produce a subjectivity through which these act as key signifiers – reproducing senses of individual identity, home, family, even community. But at the same time such an intensified commodification simultaneously presupposes and organises substantial increases in throughputs of a range of materials and energy flows, from compost/soil, to new global food commodity chains for ‘exotic’ foods, to paints, wood, and other decorating materials.
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