Introduction

Commodity Activism in Neoliberal Times

Sarah Banet-Weiser and Roopali Mukherjee

Buying Product RED items—ranging from Gap T-shirts to Apple iPods to Dell computers—means one supports the Global Fund to help eliminate AIDS in Africa. Consuming a “Caring Cup” of coffee at the Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf indicates a commitment to free trade and humane labor practices. Driving a Toyota Prius, likewise, points to the consumer’s vow to help resolve the global oil crisis as well as fight global warming. Purchasing Dove beauty products enables one to participate in the Dove Real Beauty campaign, which encourages consumers to “coproduce” nationwide workshops to help girls and young women tackle problems of low self-esteem, many of which are created by the beauty industry itself, within which Dove has been a significant player. Using their star capital and the force of their celebrity, public figures such as Angelina Jolie, Brad Pitt, and Kanye West launch social activist programs ranging from UN-sponsored humanitarian actions to protesting the global trade in blood diamonds to rebuilding low-income neighborhoods in hurricane-ravaged New Orleans. All of which is to say that within contemporary culture it is utterly unsurprising to participate in social activism by buying something.

This book explores the range of that participation and the contradictions inherent in grafting philanthropy and social action onto merchandising practices, market incentives, and corporate profits. Drawing upon a series of examples, the essays in this volume are dedicated to thinking through the proliferation of these modes of activism within contemporary culture in the US, and the emergence of what we term “commodity activism” in the neoliberal moment, a moment in which realms of culture and society once considered “outside” the official economy are harnessed, reshaped, and made legible in economic terms. Through these explorations, we attempt to understand current struggles over what social activism means, who takes shape as activists in contemporary society, and whom such activism is imagined to serve.
These shifts indicate, among other things, a powerful turn in the modes and meanings of social activism so that within the contemporary cultural economy in the US, social action, we suggest, may itself be shifting shape into a marketable commodity. As is characteristic of the commodity form—produced through labor for purposes of trade and profit within markets and fetishized in culture—commodity activism, as we encounter it today, offers critical insights into both the promise and the perils of consumer-based modes of resistance as they take shape within the dynamics of neoliberal power. What, we ask, does it mean to “do activism” in a sociocultural context increasingly defined by neoliberal ideas about self-reliance, entrepreneurial individualism, and economic responsibility? In what ways do these discourses shape contemporary conceptions of citizenship and community, of marginality and resistance? What sociohistorical and institutional forces can we trace to historicize the emergence of commodity activism? And what account can we make of the political consequences of civic engagement and action being increasingly defined by the logics of the marketplace?

It seems appropriate that a book on shifting forms of social activism should appear at this historical moment, in the midst of renewed laments over the marauding triumph of capital, the decline of heroic social movements, indeed, as some argue, the ethical futility of popular resistance itself. Marked by a new generation of “posts”—postfeminism, postrace, postpolitics—neoliberalism, we are warned, has hastened the “death of civil rights,” the “end of feminism,” the “collapse of the Left.”1 Certainly, social movements and their modes of organizing have witnessed dramatic shifts over the past half century. Thus, we find, for example, radical leaders of the past, iconic figures like Che Guevara and Malcolm X, deployed within mainstream culture as little more than fashion statements. Likewise, we find the resistance strategies of historic social movements co-opted into tactics of “brand aid” and “shopping for change” campaigns led, with little hint of irony, by corporations, corporate philanthropies, and media celebrities.2 As the tactics of social and political critique then, appear to survive as little more than diverting spectacles, neither mainstream nor leftist approaches to activism seem to escape the paradigmatic force of neoliberal capital. The proliferation of commodity activism, in other words, serves as a trenchant reminder that there is no “outside” to the logics of contemporary capitalism, that resistance, to indulge the popular cultural refrain, has, perhaps, become futile.

We may, on the one hand, characterize these forms of commodity activism as corporate appropriations, elaborate exercises in hypocrisy and artifice intended to fool the consumer, sophisticated strategies aimed at securing
ever-larger profits. On the other hand, commodity activism may illuminate
the nettled promise of innovative creative forms, cultural interventions that
bear critically, if in surprising ways, on modes of dominance and resistance
within changing social and political landscapes. Eschewing both uncritical
exuberance and blanket condemnation, the essays in this collection move
away from an either/or logic of profit versus politics, from clear distinctions
between cultural co-optation and popular resistance that have characterized
these debates within cultural studies. Instead, we situate commodity activ-
ism within its larger historical contexts, its emergence over time revealing
the vexed and contradictory means by which individuals and communities
have marshaled the ideological and cultural frameworks of consumption to
challenge, support, and reimagine the political and social dynamics of power.

The essays in this collection plumb the paradoxes of celebrity patron-
age and corporate philanthropy—both as showy spectacles that build brand
loyalty, star iconicity, and profits, and as openings for critical thought and
action—to argue that contemporary modes of commodity activism resist
easy generalization, each deserving careful study and exploration. Thus,
working from the vantage point of a single illustrative case, each essay in this
volume unpacks the symbolic, rhetorical, and discursive means by which
historical traditions of social activism are being hollowed out and rearticu-
lated in commodity form. At the same time, the authors critically challenge
the idea that hard-and-fast certainties separate capitalist power and popu-
lar resistance. The range of questions marking the ethical practices of com-
modity activism, we suggest, deny clear distinctions between modes of social
action that appear to have collapsed into co-optation and others that seem to
operate “outside” the logics of neoliberal capitalism.

Centrally engaging the conundrum of “resistance” within the current
moment in the history of capital, then, each of our contributors critically
assesses the cultural resonance and tactical significance of marketized modes
of “fighting back”—who fights, how they fight, and whether such interven-
tions have any “real” power to make social change. The essays in this volume
indulge neither the fatalism of the “postpolitical,” the idea that resistance is
so profoundly co-opted by capital that it has been rendered meaningless, nor
a romantic nostalgia for an imagined “outsider politics.” Indeed, acknowl-
edging that one can no longer—if one ever could—stand outside the system
to critique it, this collection is instead geared toward careful examination
of the contradictions that commodity activism necessarily ushers into the
dynamics of contemporary capitalist power as well as the form and force of
modes of resistance organized in the context of those dynamics. If commod-
ity activism tethers mythologies of resistance to institutions and practices of capitalism, each case study we include grapples with the historical implications of such marketized modes of resistance in the neoliberal moment—what the function and value of such “resistance” might be, how its interventions enable and repress our collective imaginations, how it influences the history of struggle and solidarity—discursively, mythically, and tactically at the current moment in history.

Against press accounts in the US that breathlessly proclaimed “the death of capitalism” in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008, the essays in this volume unpack the consequences of commodity activism with a pointed recognition of the lasting ravages of capitalist power on individual and collective subjectivities. Ongoing shifts in the legitimacies of the liberal welfare state and the coincident turn in attitudes toward social and redistributive programs hitherto managed and administered by the state raise troubling questions about the merits and meaning of social action in the “postfeminist,” “post–civil rights,” “postcapitalist” eras. The essays we present here share a conviction that free market ideologies that dominate the discursive formations of contemporary neoliberalism offer us key openings to reevaluate Marxist theories of social power and resistance as well as to critically assess the promissory scope and limits of commodity activism. In opposition to circulating laments over the limitations of Marxist approaches to cultural critique, the essays in this volume are dedicated to thinking through the consolidation of commodity activism precisely as it redefines material histories of capitalist power, identity construction, and resistance.

Recognizing the analytical power of Marxist cultural critique, the contributors to this volume resist easy answers to these dilemmas, instead critically reevaluating the form, function, and futility of resistance in the contemporary moment. On the one hand, promoting the consumption of goods, services, and celebrities as an act of charity and/or resistance, notions of social activism and philanthropy are increasingly defined by and within the rituals of media consumption. Popular media retain significant power as crucial sites for the domestication and containment of cultural imaginaries of political protest. As social action is increasingly styled by and manifest through commercialized popular culture, the case studies in this collection bring into relief the troubling ironies of anticapitalist resistance that is increasingly orchestrated and managed by capitalist media institutions.

On the other hand, this volume also illuminates vulnerabilities within totalizing categories like “domination” and “resistance,” enabling fresh insights into the lurking promise of political resistance within the bounds of
commodified popular culture and mainstream media. Our contributors take seriously the potential, for example, of the conditions of possibility of activism, which, despite commodification and bowdlerization in the neoliberal era, also reveals itself as a productive force for politics and the constitution of critical subjectivities and solidarities. In this sense, the collection serves centrally to illuminate how abiding axes of oppression and inequity—race, gender, class, and so on—interact with consumer cultures to reinvent grassroots identifications as well as tactical strategies for resistance and reimagination. These shifts in the relationships between citizenship and civic action, we suggest, are neither linear nor predetermined.

Activist, Citizen, Consumer: Historical Relations

As many historians of consumer culture have pointed out, dominant ideologies in the US have long sustained the mythic belief that the consumer is qualitatively different from the citizen. While surely citizens are also consumers and vice versa, there have historically been important ideological stakes in keeping these subject positions distinct. As economic historians John Kenneth Galbraith, Lizabeth Cohen, Lawrence Glickman, and others have noted, there remains a residual ethos (in the popular, political, and academic spheres) that Americans acted first as virtuous citizens before transforming or, from a more critical vantage point, deteriorating, into consumers.5

These transformations are seen to originate at different historical moments, but there is a general consensus that a heightened form of the “citizen-consumer” emerged in force during the late 20th and early 21st centuries in the US. Postwar affluence and conspicuous consumption spurred state discourses encouraging consumption practices as “patriotic” and the transformation of social institutions within the “Consumers’ Republic.” An increasingly superficial cultural sphere emerged over this period dominated by celebrities, advertising, and profit-oriented media institutions. Populist mythologies of a voracious and meddling state bureaucracy paved the path to widespread Reaganite deregulation; rampant, and often, rogue, corporatism; and market bubbles collapsing cyclically into fiscal scandal and crisis. The confluence of these economic and cultural forces advanced a nation of consumer-citizens, perhaps most visibly represented in the ever-growing divides between rich and poor, moral panics scapegoating “welfare queens” and other state dependents, and cultural mythologies celebrating individually minded folks bent on “enterprising themselves” rather than collective action and social justice.
While it is certainly true that these economic transitions facilitated the discursive transformation of a nation of citizens into a nation of consumers, and consonant cultural shifts from collective civic sensibilities to a bootstraps ethos of individualist entrepreneurship, ideological categories of “the consumer” and “the citizen” have neither clearly nor consistently been diametrically opposed. That is, the history of citizenship as it has taken shape within consumer culture in the US is not a linear one with noticeable, disruptive—and regressive—breaks between citizens and consumers. While this book situates its examples within the historical moment of neoliberalism, we note that commodity activism did not emerge anew from the discursive formations of neoliberal capital. Rather, within the evolutionary history of capitalism, consumers have consistently—and often contradictorily—embraced consumption as a platform from which to launch progressive political and cultural projects.

For example, shifts from bourgeois consumption to mass consumption that began in the late 18th century were brought into bold relief within the industrial and political revolutions of the 19th and 20th centuries. Immigrant cultures consolidated new consumer communities in the US, making consumption practices a key platform for struggles over class, race, and gender formations in the late 19th and 20th centuries. Each of these historical junctures represents a crucial transition in the relations between individuals, their consumption habits, and their political subjectivities. That is, citizenship in the US has historically been understood and fashioned through consumption practices, providing us with a wealth of examples from early protests against taxation to boycotts for labor and civil rights to the “shopping for change” campaigns of today.

In particular, histories of consumer movements in the US demonstrate a tradition of consumer-citizens acting in ways that are intimately connected with community or collective politics. For instance, as Victoria de Grazia, Kathy Peiss, Jennifer Scanlon, and Lynn Spigel, among others, have documented, many middle- and working-class women crafted new experiences of personal autonomy outside the home in 19th-century Europe and the US via pleasurable rituals of shopping and material acquisition. Importantly, gendered habits of shopping for clothing, buying and wearing cosmetics, and acquiring new-fangled gadgets and appliances for the bourgeois home were not merely about the identification of consumption with femininity; nor were they only about patriarchal domesticity in which women were charged with provisioning for the home. Indeed, while it may be the case that consumption practices stand in as metonyms for sexual and social oppressions, mass consumption also arguably “liberated” women from a stifling domesticity, encouraging new inde-
dependent gendered subjectivities and, in some situations, subverting traditional gendered relations in both public and private spheres. As de Grazia explains,

> It is the capacity of commodities to move between the customarily female spaces of the market and the household, between the world of production and the world of reproduction, wreaking havoc with the very polarities—of public and private, calculation and desire, commercial sphere and domestic space, male and female—that have forged modern definitions of womanhood in Western society, as well as the terms for interpreting women's subordination.⁹

> It is important, in other words, to recognize the variety of ways that consumption practices reshaped and reimagined gendered subjectivities and relations, and that the consumer-citizen did indeed facilitate broader activist impulses that were geared to political goals and aspirations larger than those limited to individual desires and subjectivities.

Likewise, practicing consumer citizenship was crucial for immigrants, African Americans, and other racialized constituencies in the 19th- and 20th-century US as a means to mitigate and challenge racist practices and cultural exclusions. Projecting political aspirations onto commodities and consumption practices, disenfranchised racialized communities organized boycotts of segregated public spaces, collectively invested in independent businesses, and engaged in strategic consumption practices that called into question hegemonic relations of racial power and inequity. As Robert Weems Jr., Lizabeth Cohen, Jason Chambers, and others have documented, for instance, the civil rights movement that transformed racial formations in the mid-20th century US was notably organized around issues of consumption and access—in retail stores, at lunch counters, and on city buses—as a means to enfranchise African Americans.¹⁰ Each of these struggles, it must be noted, was founded on the promise of the market to deliver social acceptance and democratic rights, and on the force of mobilizations of consumers to effect social and political change.¹¹ In each instance, tactics of social action engaged with rituals and institutions of commerce and capitalist exchange to demand political freedom and equality.

Likewise, the founding of consumer protection agencies in the US, the mass organizing efforts of consumer activist Ralph Nader starting in the 1950s, and the passage of federal laws regulating deceptive advertising practices, consumer fraud, and products endangering public health and safety were aimed at making corporations and markets more accountable to consumer needs and concerns.¹² These programs instilled corporate ethics of
“customer service,” securing the profitability of corporations that reoriented their business practices to be more responsive to consumers while they emboldened consumers to collectively demand higher standards in goods and services in exchange for brand loyalties. Taking a different tack, anticonsumerist mobilizations organized by countercultural groups like the hippies during the 1960s and 1970s in the US sought to debunk cultural associations between material acquisition and personal happiness and were geared to “simple living” and ecologically sustainable lifestyles. Calling for the outright rejection of material needs and desires, assumed to be fabricated by greedy corporations and foisted on hapless consumers, these struggles revealed their own political paradoxes over time as campaigns like “Buy Black,” the Whole Earth Catalog, and publications like AdBusters proffered anticonsumerist critiques that, ironically, urged consumerism itself.13

Throughout the 19th-century and early to mid-20th-century US, then, consumer movements emphasized collective action and the formation of consumer communities geared to political goals, each marked by its own paradoxes and contradictions. The “Consumers’ Republic” that Lizabeth Cohen so carefully delineates throughout the mid-20th century in the US had an emphasis on civic virtues of consumerism, that is, consumer citizenship was largely understood as enabling broader goals of equal access, social justice, and community building. Emphasizing collective mobilization, these movements marshaled political goals beyond those that addressed individualized consumptive desire and identity. They mobilized around issues of access—for the poor, the working classes, immigrants, and disenfranchised racialized groups—and toward leveraging the market so it would function more efficiently and responsively for all kinds of consumers. Such consumer politics, it must be noted, were neither antimarket nor anticapitalist. Rather, they focused on the liberatory promise of the market itself, buoyed by the conviction that capitalist exchange was key to transforming the political condition of consumer-citizens.14

Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times

The longue durée of consumer activism in the US, then, encapsulates a two-centuries-long trajectory that is scored with tensions over the ethics and expediency of consumer activism. In the contemporary moment commodity activism is marked by both the legacies of and transitions from these historical antecedents. As the neoliberal moment is witness to ever-sharper delineations of the marketplace as constitutive of our political imaginaries, our
identities, rights, and ideologies are evermore precisely formulated within the logics of consumption and commodification rather than in opposition to them. Here, cultural notions of liberal democratic subjectivity transform into capitalist citizenship, and rituals of consumption increasingly stand in for other modes of democratic engagement with profound consequences for what counts as “civic resistance.” And, as participation within public spheres is increasingly shaped and secured by one's capacities to consume, these transitions exact their heaviest price from marginalized constituencies—women, nonwhites, and the poor. Thus, commodity activism reveals new challenges that become legible within the historical and institutional particularities of neoliberalism.

While there are competing definitions of the idea of neoliberalism and significant theoretical debate over its implications, we draw from David Harvey here for whom neoliberalism is

in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.

Thus, neoliberal society has reimagined not just economic transactions and resources but also social and individual relations, the dynamics of affect and emotion, modes of social and political resistance, and the terrain of culture itself. It is not simply that neoliberalism has seized realms of life hitherto sheltered from the relations of production but that neoliberalism reorganizes society and culture such that “the role of culture has expanded in an unprecedented way into the political and economic at the same time that conventional notions of culture have largely been emptied out.” In this milieu, individual rights and freedoms are guaranteed not by the state but rather by the freedom of the market and of trade.

The constitutive force of neoliberalism as it shapes the ethical and material contours of commodity activism is notably revealed in the surge, in recent years, in practices of “ethical consumption” or “corporate social responsibility” (CSR). The emergence of neoliberalism, as Milton Friedman famously heralded it in the New York Times Magazine in 1970, reopened enduring questions about the prudence and folly of corporate commitments to social and political causes. Railing against those who argued that “business is not
concerned ‘merely’ with profit but also with promoting desirable ‘social’ ends; that business has a ‘social conscience’ and takes seriously its responsibilities for providing employment, eliminating discrimination, avoiding pollution,” Friedman asserted, to the contrary, that the “sole social responsibility of business was to increase its profits.”

Friedman’s contention notwithstanding, corporate relationships with social and political causes—sweat-free labor, the environment, funding for AIDS and cancer research—proliferated rather than dwindled under the aegis of neoliberal capital and, as the cases of commodity activism we present in this volume reveal, social causes reoriented themselves to assimilate rather than oppose the logics of profit and capitalist gain. Indeed, in recent decades, the role of corporations in building a better planet, achieving world peace, curing Alzheimer’s disease, and so on, is so commonplace, it is often hard to take seriously. To wit, the fast-food chain McDonald’s maintains a website entitled “Values in Practice” that features posts on sustainable supply chains, environmental responsibility, nutrition, and well-being. Coffee mega-retailer Starbucks has a program entitled Starbucks Shared Planet™, that uses the tagline “You and Starbucks. It’s bigger than coffee” with little recognition of the irony that the term “shared planet” is now a trademarked commodity. Similarly, the clothing company Geoffrey Beene places a card in the folds of its garments that details the various causes the company is committed to, with the words “Enjoy your new Geoffrey Beene garment . . . because nothing feels better than giving back.”

Within the discursive formations of neoliberalism, then, CSR aligns corporate support of social issues with building corporate brands and consolidating brand revenues while social justice transforms into yet another strategic venture to secure the corporate bottom line. CSR, in other words, is “good for business,” and within the neoliberal context, this means exploiting what David Vogel terms “the market for virtue.” Vogel highlights this historical shift in the logic and practices of CSR with a compelling example about consumer activists who, in the 1960s and 1970s, protested pharmaceutical giant Dow Chemical’s production of napalm for use in the war in Vietnam:

The antiwar activists who, during the 1960s, pressured Dow Chemical to stop producing napalm, framed their argument exclusively in moral terms: they neither knew nor cared whether producing napalm would affect Dow’s earnings. In contrast, the contemporary environmental activists who are working with Dow to reduce its carbon emissions argue that doing so will make Dow more profitable by lowering its costs.
Vogel’s case reveals key differences in activist paradigms across time, but here we are also offered a critical opportunity to unpack shifts in the moral frameworks undergirding commodity activism. Moral virtue, in this context, is reframed as *consonant with* the interests of contemporary capitalism and, as Vogel points out, commands an increase in cultural and economic capital. Part of the discourse of contemporary neoliberal capital, then, is the notion that profit is achieved not by ruthless, inhumane practices or by unrestrained avarice but, rather, by both the corporation and the consumer acting “virtuously.” Thus, even as the labor practices of multinational corporations and trade agreements across the globe remain sharply skewed in the interests of economic elites, corporations align themselves with social causes to bolster their reputations as good citizens. As Laurie Ouellette points out in this volume, as a public relations venture directed at consumers in the US, social responsibility is embraced as a pro-business strategy.

**Activist Consumption and the “Enterprising” Self**

Within the political economy of neoliberalism, however, it is not simply that social realms have become recoded as economic but that individuals, and in the specific case of this collection, consumer-citizens, have themselves become reconstituted as economically productive. These “enterprising” selves, as Michel Foucault has argued, become key actors within neoliberalism, expressed not only through a retreat from collectivity and public spheres but also, as Alison Hearn in this volume suggests, through a normalizing of individual entrepreneurialism and the branding of the neoliberal self. The current transition, then, shifts from a 20th-century focus on consumer movements to a neoliberal emphasis on the individual consumer—a shift from a collective reimagining of the market to a retooling of capitalist practices and strategies to better accommodate the self-interests of citizen-consumers. What distinguishes commodity activism from earlier consumer movements is its mode of mobilization, the emphasis having shifted from larger political goals to consumers themselves “as the chief beneficiaries of political activism.” Likewise, as the essays in this anthology reveal, movement tactics and paradigms of collective organizing themselves reveal a kind of “commodity creep” so that even radical imaginaries of social critique seem to falter under the seductive force of neoliberalism. Thus, as political imaginaries and subjectivities are reshaped to fit the individualized ethos of neoliberal capitalism, mooring them evermore securely to the logics of consumption and marketization, commodity activism emerges as both symptomatic of and tailored to this historical transition.
Consumer-citizens, in this moment, increasingly practice moral and civic virtue principally through their pocketbooks. Within the logics of commodity activism, “doing good” and being a good consumer collapse into one and the same thing. Thus, as Samantha King, Josée Johnston and Kate Cairns, Jo Littler, and others in this collection suggest, the practices of “ethical consumption” need to be interrogated not only as a means to historicize shifts in relative autonomy enabled by neoliberal ideologies but, as important, to understand what is lost in them. For example, ethical consumption practices are designed for the wealthy, evidenced not only by the higher prices of, say, food produced for organic markets or “green nappies” for middle-class mothers but also by the fact that most consumer activists in the US tend to be more affluent and educated. Our attention to these activist practices, then, offers clues to the means by which working-class Americans may be gradually edged out of political activism by the class dynamics of commodity activism.

Likewise, our explorations in this collection take seriously the paradoxes of commodity activism as it reimagines “value” within neoliberal culture. From a variety of perspectives, the scholars in this collection locate the proliferation of commodity activism within shifts in what constitutes labor, and consequently, how value is generated within late capitalist markets. For example, the contemporary moment is characterized by ongoing shifts in definitions of “interactivity” and “agency,” changes that have been hastened by the development of rapid, inexpensive media technologies, and viral circulation of content enabled by such mobile, miniature innovations. Given the democratizing potential of such “do-it-yourself” (DIY) activity and user-generated content, for instance, this collection enables fresh perspectives on the extent of control that media gatekeepers continue to enjoy over the production of popular culture and vernacular practices. Although traditional expert knowledges are indeed tempered by innovations in viral media technologies and their vernacular practices, as Mark Andrejevic reminds us, consumer-generated content does not simply empower the consumer. It also creates opportunities for corporations to offload labor onto consumers in the name of democratic openness. Thus, while commodity activism demands reevaluations of traditional binaries between popular and commercial culture, vernacular and mainstream production, and media producers and consumers, as a number of our contributors in this collection reveal, activists engaged in “shopping for change” campaigns contribute to the profitability of corporate brands, the commodification of cultural identity, the marketization of political dissent, and so on. Each marks the collapse of boundaries between producers and consumers, and each reveals an instance of labor that
is unrecompensed and, indeed, unrecognized by corporations that nevertheless derive substantial market value from it.

Within these relations of production, commodity activism generates value as it is created by the fetishization of social action as a marketized commodity, that is, value created by the “sign value” of consumption and consumer practices. Mindful of Marx’s insistence that capitalism renders invisible the social relations of production, we suggest that commodity activism hints at new dilemmas raised by the emergence of “affective” or “immaterial” labor, ideas that Sarah Banet-Weiser, Alison Hearn, and others in this collection pursue further. In other words, as commodity activism produces market value in affective relations with brands, celebrities, and political virtue, our work in this collection reveals how new forms of labor are made available by the marketization of dissent. Moreover, the value generated by such labor yields new modes of objectification and exploitation. If commodity fetishism results in objects becoming humanized and human relations being objectified, the commodification of social activism engages profound questions about the reach of contemporary capitalism into the circumstances of our choices as producers, consumers, and moral citizens.

*Buying Good, Doing Good: The Contradictions of Commodity Activism*

As it has taken shape, this anthology engages with scholarly dialogues about how neoliberal capitalism both enables and confounds modes of social activism at the present moment. We situate commodity activism as a specific kind of product emerging from labor in the neoliberal capitalist economy. We theorize how the phenomena of commodity activism open up new possibilities for the construction of identities and solidarities. We focus on the role of consumers in the formation of new cultural expressions and cultural production within emerging economic landscapes. Finally, we offer careful substantiation for new theoretical frameworks that refuse the traditional and nostalgic binaries that position politics in opposition to consumerism.

This book illuminates some of the central contradictions that are made visible through commodity activism. However, our goal is neither simply to “expose” commodity activism as a clever hoax intended to bring in greater profits for corporations nor to celebrate commodity activism as an ideal form of social action for 21st-century consumers. Rather, it is our hope that this collection offers a variety of ways to understand and situate commodity activism within the contemporary era by avoiding the pitfalls of binary thinking that
separate consumption practices from political struggles. The creation of value continues to drive capitalism, yet the meaning of “value” shifts and is reimagined within the context of neoliberal capitalism. The commodity in question is not only a tangible product (though tangible products are still clearly important within the current political economy) but also intangible attributes that include cultural responsibility, moral virtue, political ethics, and social action itself.

These are the questions that we maintain must be asked at this particular juncture in the history of capitalism—questions that revolve not simply around whether commodity activism empowers or disempowers the consumer but rather about how practices of consumption, structures of political economy, and the creation of political and cultural subjectivities are entangled within contemporary values of neoliberalism. This book wrestles with these questions, despite the fact that due to changing media and technological platforms, instabilities and crises confronting Western capitalism, and shifting imaginaries about the state's role in culture and society, our answers to such questions may be, at best, partial, perishable, and provisional. More than anything, through the essays in this collection, we offer a range of points of entry into a larger cultural and political conversation about who and what consumers are and should be, about shifts that notions of citizenship and the state are currently enduring, and, as well, about larger social goals that contemporary commodity activism may be uniquely poised to meet.

From global health campaigns sponsored by pharmaceutical corporations to social movements capitulating to mantras of individualism and entrepreneurial responsibility, this anthology engages the ways in which the radical potential of social activism is being transformed in a variety of ways. Each of the cases we include serves to explore the vicissitudes of what it means to pursue politically activist work in this historical moment.

To these ends, this anthology is organized as a multidisciplinary, methodologically diverse project; our contributors work from a variety of scholarly and disciplinary homes, including communication, cultural and media studies, ethnography, sociology, and critical policy studies. We situate this book within the nascent field of “critical consumer studies,” a field that takes consumer culture and consumption habits seriously as sites of scholarly inquiry, and which is dedicated to careful investigations of the contradictions and ruptures within capitalist consumerism in order to discern both the promise and the limits of political action. Drawing from film, television, and other media texts, consumer activist campaigns, and cultures of celebrity and corporate patronage, each empirical case serves to highlight a robust range of theoretical problematics including, for example, the spectacularization of
catastrophe to profitable ends within the logics of disaster capitalism, the
glamorization of suffering within public relations portfolios of media celeb-
rities, the corporate production of cultural identities, and the capitalization
of difference in ways that yoke politics to profits.

NOTES

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