Anonymous Inequality in Global Consumer Culture

For four days in late 1999, the city of Seattle was paralyzed. Police patrolled the streets in riot gear. Almost 600 people were arrested. The scent of tear gas filled the air. Mixed with the chants of peaceful protesters were the sounds of smashing windows. It was the first mass demonstration in decades to capture the attention of the nation, and it was the last of the millennium.

The primary target of this protest was the World Trade Organization (WTO). If there had been questions about the WTO before the Seattle protest, the main one would have been, what is it? And the answer, that it is an international organization established in 1995 to reduce trade barriers, would have brought a yawn to most listeners. But it was opposition to this organization of trade experts proposed by Canada, based in Geneva, and representing 135 countries that set into motion these extraordinary events.

Rallying around the cry “Shut Down the WTO!” thousands of protesters blocked Seattle’s streets and made it impossible for delegates to enter the meeting. Anarchists, trade unions, environmentalists, and various groups more difficult to categorize (with such names as ACME Collective, Bannarchly Movement, Portland Spuds, and STARC Naked) combined to confront an organization whose primary mission is to allow consumer goods to move more easily around the world.

Self-described anarchists recruited students from local Seattle campuses. They joined steelworkers and dockworkers, farmers and fishermen. The protesters had different and often conflicting
concerns about cheap labor in developing countries, some about the environment, some about genetically engineered food, many about the spreading power of transnational corporations. People wore outfits in giant costumes, carrying inflatable dolphins, dressed as sea turtles, sporting fluorescent orange hard hats. These were cardboards puppets, waving ears of corn, never-beating five-gallon-bucket drums, and posters representing every political stripe and color.

The protesters' explicit complaints about the WTO were frequently emblazoned by the multitude of voices, and, even when clear, they often did not stand up to closer inspection. For example, probably the clearest criticism made by the protesters was against the WTO ruling that overturned a U.S. ban on the sale of Asian shrimp whose catch endangers sea turtles. However, none of the protesters' literature, websites, or speakers took into account the WTO claim that the ruling was about discrimination, not environmental protection. The suit was brought before the WTO by Asian countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Thailand) who successfully argued that the United States discriminated because it provided favored Caribbean countries with technical and financial assistance and longer transition periods for their turtles to start using turtle-excluder devices. The WTO ruling clearly stated that the United States can pursue the protection of endangered turtles, but that this difference in treatment cannot be justified. According to the WTO, the goal of this and other rulings is to encourage countries to respect the nondiscrimination provisions of the multilateral trading system that the countries themselves have negotiated (Ruggiero, 2000). Those rules allow the protection of species, the environment, and scarce resources so long as the protection is applied without arbitrariness or unjustifiable bias and is not just a cover for discriminatory treatment.

Nevertheless, the specific facts of the complaints are not really relevant either to the protesters or to our theme of consumption. The protesters did not need to engage the WTO's explanation because the WTO was primarily a symbol of the larger forces that constitute a spreading consumer culture. It could be argued that like market forces, the WTO is remote and mysterious, powerful and unaccountable—that like consumer culture, it is concerned with commodities and markets rather than jobs, health, the environment, development, and national sovereignty. It was not a particular ruling or even a particular organization that was being targeted, but the spread of consumer culture around the world.
one of the attendees, former British Columbia premier Glen Clark, said, "There is a real backslash against globalization. People are starting to question the genuineness at the altar of the free market" (Wayward 2000, 94). More than the WTO, the protesters seemed to be expressing rage about being dominated by corporations like Starbucks, McDonald's, and Nike. And, indeed, more than the WTO meeting, these streets bore the brunt of the damage.

Early on the first day of the protest, small groups began breaking windows of retail stores, such as Nike and Starbucks, that depend heavily on global trade to furnish consumer products. The downtown Starbucks café was looted, and soon twenty-five other Starbucks were closed (see description of Starbucks in chapter 6). By the end of the four days, downtown businesses claim to have lost $20 million in sales and property damage (Brunner 2000, A1). Ironically, many of the businesses targeted by the protesters were seen by local community leaders as glowing examples of downtown's rebirth.

According to some, these multinational businesses and free trade in general will, in the long run, be beneficial for the city issues that the protesters point to. By boosting the economy as a whole, global trade may create resources that could be used to train workers for more valuable jobs. As living standards rise, people may demand a cleaner environment, and they could insist that their country's new riches be invested in people's health. In addition, there is reason to believe that free trade will help close the gap between rich and poor counties. In the last twelve years, as the free trade mantra has dominated global relations, developing countries' share in world trade has risen from one-fifth to more than one-quarter, and their share of trade in manufactured products has doubled. It could be argued that the problems associated with free trade have less to do with trade than with a lack of political will to justly use the riches that trade produces, but, as we will argue near the end of this chapter, even this lack of political will may be traceable to a spreading consumer culture.

**Starbucks and Anonymous Inequality**

Both the advantages and disadvantages of global trade can be examined by looking closely at Starbucks. Starbucks seems to be everywhere. By 2005, Starbucks predicts that they will have a total of 10,000 locations in sixty countries (Dowditch 2002).
Starbucks began as a roaster of high-quality coffee, but what spurred their growth and created the mass-market, specialty coffee industry was the decision by Howard Schultz to open Euro-
pean-style coffee bars instead of just selling coffee beans to restaurants. With that, Starbucks became much more than a cup of coffee. It became a brand. Along with over two dozen varieties of beans, an assortment of mugs, teapots, and coffee-making equipment, they sell their own cookbook and even a Starbucks compact disc. You can also buy a bottled Starbucks Frappuccino either in Starbucks cafes or in many grocery stores, where you will also find their six different Starbucks coffee ice creams.

With this success has come a notoriety that is at first puzz-
lng. In a recent popular movie, Austin Powers 2: The Spy Who Shagged Me, Starbucks was portrayed as a front for the evil empire of the megalomaniac villain. On the one-year anniversary of the WTO protest, vandals attacked nine Starbucks stores. In addition, Starbucks became the target of a sustained protest over the in-
equities of the international coffee-trading system. Nobody denies that Starbucks is exemplary in their treat-
ment of their own workers. Even part-timers at Starbucks are en-
titled to medical benefits and participation in the stock-option plan. Furthermore, Starbucks had been strongly involved in local charities and even set up its own philanthropic foundation. It is the company’s effect on workers in other parts of the world, who do not have any formal relation with Starbucks, and its unin-
tended effects on entire geographic regions that are at issue.

We will call what is at issue here anonymous inequality. Un-
like the stigmatizing inequality discussed in the previous chapter, anonymous inequality is created without anyone intending it. This idea of a result without intention may seem paradoxical. For many sociologists, it is useful to think of such relations as if they involved some gigantic mechanical device. This is the image that most have in mind when they refer to these relations as a system. The capitalist market is just such a system. It can be thought of as a “virtual” mechanical device that takes consumer actions as input and distributes scarce resources as its output. Even though the consumer only means to buy a cup of coffee, the system takes this action as an input and uses it to distribute resources. In many cases, this distribution is unequal.

In table 5.1, we have listed the difference between stigmatiz-
ing inequality, which was discussed in chapter 4, and anonymous inequality. The key difference is the different way that people in-
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5.1 Stigmatizing versus Anonymous Inequality</th>
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<tr>
<td>Relations between people</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other know each other, at least recognize each other</td>
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<td>Involvement of individual's intentions</td>
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<td>Political effects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use of consumer objects</td>
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<td>Consumer culture's effect on inequality</td>
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Involving the inequality is related to each other. In stigmatizing inequality, the people often know each other, or they at least are able to recognize each other. For example, in a racially based system of inequality, stigmatizing inequality would be in effect only if certain races were considered for higher-paying positions. In many cases, those eligible for the position and those excluded from it know each other personally. At the very least, they are able to recognize each other as members of different races. In anonymous inequality, the different people need not know each other and usually do not. For instance, we will look at the effect of the coffee trade on a system of global inequality. The buyer of a cup of coffee does not know the plantation worker who grew the particular beans used to brew the coffee, nevertheless the two may be involved in a system of inequality. Indeed, if the buyer of the coffee becomes concerned about his or her involvement in the system of inequality, it is very difficult for the buyer to discover who exactly is being disadvantaged by the system.

The second difference is that in stigmatizing inequality, the inequality is either intended or part of ingrained habits. One of the important trends of modern culture is that inequality based
on ingrained habits is disappearing, so that most stigmatizing inequality is now entirely intentional. Previously, people might have gone to segregated churches and restaurants simply because that is what they were used to and comfortable with. Today, most segregation and discrimination is a conscious decision. In stigmatizing inequality today, people are not hired for jobs, are not served in certain establishments, are not allowed in specified areas because other people actively intend to discriminate against them.

In anonymous inequality, the intention is not necessary. The coffee consumer does not intend to hurt the plantation worker. In fact, the buyer of the coffee may actually admire plantation workers in an abstract, romanticized way. The consumer simply wants consistently good coffee for a reasonable price. But, even without any intention, it is still the actions of the consumer that cause the inequality. The consumer may be surprised or even appalled at the result of their action, but that makes the inequality no less real.

The third distinction is based on political effects. Because stigmatizing inequality involves people we know and because it is intentional, it has direct political effects. The creation and perpetuation of such a system of inequality usually involves political decisions. Furthermore, the dismantling of such a system also involves political decisions. Laws barring discrimination are passed, affirmative action programs are put into place, and so forth.

Anonymous inequality also involves political decisions, but in a less straightforward way, because anonymous inequality often appears to be simply the workings of an economic system. As we will discuss later, the economic system of international trade requires political decisions regarding, for example, tariffs and so on. It also has political effects such as supporting political regimes that will protect large landholders. Nevertheless, these political decisions appear to be just background to the workings of the economic system.

This peculiar mix of economic and political systems makes political action against anonymous inequality particularly difficult. For stigmatizing inequality, laws can be demanded and government programs can be instituted, but since anonymous inequality is set into motion by the unintended actions of the consumer, political remedies are more difficult. Because it appears to be an economic problem, economic solutions, such as boycotts, are commonly proposed. As we will discuss later, there is a long his-
tory of boycotts and consumer action in relation to both stigmatiz-
ing and anonymous inequality. However, such consumer ac-
tions against anonymous inequality are problematic mainly be-
cause consumer action is also one of the prime causes of the
inequality; even though it may be perceived as such.

A fourth difference between stigmatizing inequality and
anonymous inequality is the way in which consumer objects are
used. Consumer objects are involved in both types of inequality,
because such objects are one of our primary means of relating to
each other. With stigmatizing inequality, what we buy is dis-
played to different groups of people in different ways. If, for ex-
ample, we purchase a white sheet and create a hoiced robe out
of it to wear, the object functions as a sign in a system of stig-
matizing inequality. We buy certain things or keep others from buy-
ing certain things in order to display our difference. For example,
one race may not be able to buy a meal at a nice restaurant. In-
stead, they are forced to consume meals in a manner that marks
them as different.

However, it is also true that the purchase of a consumer
product relates us in an anonymous way with all of those who
worked to produce and supply this product. Furthermore, all of
those who worked to supply us with these products, are con-
ected in an economic system that takes our consumption as one
input and that produces inequality. Thus, for example, the cup of
coffee that you might have bought before sitting down to read
this text. In that simple transaction, you entered into a relation-
ship with hundreds of others: the waitperson, the owner of the
coffee shop, the people working at the roaster, the importer, the
truck driver, the dockworkers, all of the people on the ship that
brought the beans, the coffee plantation owner, the pickers, and
so on. In addition, you supported a particular trading relation be-
tween countries, a particular form of government in the grower's
country that has been historically shaped by the coffee trade, a
particular relation between the plantation owner and the worker,
and many other social relations. You did all of this by exchanging
money for a cup of coffee. In the relation between these objects
lies hidden all of these social relations between people.

Finally, the growth of consumer culture has had different ef-
fects on these two types of inequality. We argued in chapter 4
that stigmatizing inequality tends to be subverted by consumer
culture because the stigmatizing signs of difference simply be-
come part of a fashion system. In addition, the stigmatized
people tend to become market segments. This happens to different degrees with different kinds of stigmatizing inequality, and also it happens less to the stigmatization of the elderly and the poor. Even so, consumer cultures tend to have less stigmatizing inequality than other types of cultures.

The effect is quite the opposite with anonymous inequality. We will argue in this chapter that anonymous inequality is one of the main effects of the growth of consumer culture.

Coffee and Capitalism

Starbucks aside, coffee is an important commodity to examine in trying to understand the anonymous inequality of modern consumer culture and its global dimensions. Michael Jimenez calls coffee “the paramount beverage of that emergent consumer society” (1995, 53). Chapter 1 already discussed the importance of coffee, along with sugar, cocoa, and tea, for spurring the changes toward a consumer culture in seventeenth-century Europe. Coffee was one of the first commodities to go from a luxury of the elite to an everyday necessity for the middle class (see Table 5.2). It was also one of the first common products to be tied to a global market.

Furthermore, it is generally accepted that the idea of equal democratic participation in political decisions without regard to wealth and status (one of its first expressions in eighteenth-century coffeehouses [Halperin 1989]). It has been claimed that one of the attractions of the Starbucks phenomenon is that it harkens back to these earlier coffeehouses. Starbucks has designed their shops to suggest a place for conversation and community rather than simply a place to purchase coffee.

Aside from coffee’s historical role, its intrinsic properties seem particularly well suited to capitalism. Early in its promotion, coffee marketers sponsored research documenting the rela-

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**Table 5.2 World Coffee Production, 1980-1990**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Production (metric ton)</th>
<th>Percent Change</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>2,222,441</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>3,264,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>4,260,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>5,090,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>6,292,004</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

tion between coffee and productivity. People were particularly encouraged to use coffee to overcome the body’s natural rhythms of a mid-morning and late afternoon slowdown. As the middle class grew and office routines replaced more ingratiating activities, the coffee break became an accepted feature of the workplace. Even beyond the enhancement of productivity, coffee also became an important part of leisure time in the emerging consumer culture. Housewives met for a cup of coffee. Coffee was regularly served to guests. It also became the beverage of choice for dining out. As Gregory Dicum and Nina Luttinger claim, “In a society that combines buzzing overstimulation with soul-sucking meaninglessness, coffee and its associated rituals are, for many of us, the lubricants that make it possible to go on” (1999, ix).

The acceptance of coffee at the beverage of the middle class was motivated by several changes in the way it was produced, marketed, and consumed. In production, economies of scale and technological improvements reduced costs significantly, so that even the lower end of the middle class could afford it. In marketing, coffee was one of the first products to move from a bulk, unbranded growers’ item to a prepackaged, brand-name item. In fact, the introduction of the vacuum-packed can made coffee one of the few products that was actually improved by being prepackaged. In addition, there were some important changes in the technology of consuming coffee. For example, the automatic electric coffeemaker was invented in 1930, and there was a batch of technological developments in household grinders, improved coffeepots, and filters that stimulated greater household usage. However, most significant were the changes in advertising coffee.

A conglomerate of retailers and marketers called the Joint Coffee Publicity Committee was formed in the early decades of the twentieth century to promote the use of coffee. They took advantage of the new media such as radio and cinema, as well as billboards, newspapers, and magazines to promote coffee drinking. By the 1920s, this marketing included an educational program aimed at housewives on the importance of coffee. These campaigns attempted to use women’s self-esteem to their ability to make a good cup of coffee. One “subtle” advertisement said that “Mrs. Bradley surprised her husband” with a good cup of coffee and “they lived happily ever after” (cited in Limeszen 1995, 50). Another focus of the campaign was on advertising the medical benefits of coffee in medical journals.
Thanks to these changes, coffee became a staple of the new consumer culture. By the 1960s, coffee was accepted as the pre-eminent adult beverage. Most adults drink it. Few households were unprepared to offer it guests. It was available in nearly all public spaces.

This demand for coffee created a national market for a standardized product. What had been a patchwork of local roasters with different-tasting products became a homogenous national product. Regional roasters quickly went national and were soon bought out by food conglomerates. These changes placed more emphasis on standardization and price than on taste and quality. Consequently, coffee quality decreased. As advertising increasingly focused on the brand, Ponti tells us that "the product itself became of secondary importance. . . By competing almost exclusively on advertising, the major roasters stripped coffee of most of its charm and appeal." (2002, 1110).

Whatever has happened to its charm and appeal, coffee embodies the significance of anonymous global connections in a consumer culture. For most of the last century, coffee has been the world's most valuable (legally) traded commodity after oil. By examining coffee, we see the far-flung and unintended social effects of the vast network of market relations in a global consumer culture. Although most coffee is consumed in developed countries, it is primarily grown in developing countries. It is the perfect example of a commodity that depends on international trade, and it exemplifies the way that inequality works in our global consumer culture.

The coffee trade has profoundly shaped the societies of the countries that produce it. The history of the trade in coffee begins in the colonial era for which it was an ideal crop since it grew only in the colonies, was easily shipped, and had a ready market in Europe. As the colonial era faded, coffee was the primary commodity that allowed (or forced) the newly liberated countries to be outwardly focused.

Because the United States was not really a colonial power, its relation to the coffee trade was somewhat different. People from the United States never owned or even managed the coffee plantations. They were simply the main buyers. Nevertheless, the effects on the coffee-growing countries were the same.

In most of these coffee-producing countries, the cultivation of coffee transformed the geographic and demographic landscape. The replacement of tropical forests with coffee estates was
equated with development. New towns, roads, and railroads were built to service the increased coffee production. The natural environment, the people's pattern of settlement, and even the region's identity were all deeply affected by the coffee trade. In addition, coffee has shaped the politics of these regions. In most coffee-growing countries, production was concentrated into huge plantations with a few rich owners and many poor workers. In most cases, this promoted repressive authoritarian governments to protect the rich landowners from the impoverished workers.

A historian of Brazil observed that "the economic dominance of coffee was unquestioned. Among the property-owning sectors of society the right of the planters to control the political system was unquestioned, and the mass of working people—slaves, freedmen, native Brazilian peasants, and immigrants—had no political voice. The government of São Paulo was itself the instrument of the coffee planters" (Holloway 1960, 39).

Most importantly, the production of coffee tied the local economy to an international economic system. The effect of this is especially evident with coffee because coffee prices have always been subject to significant price fluctuations in the international market. Coffee's production is tied to tropical weather patterns that are inherently unstable and unpredictable. If production were limited to one region, this would not matter because bad weather would cause a shortage and higher prices, thereby recompensing the region affected. However, since coffee production is spread all over the tropical regions of the world, a drought in Africa could happen at the same time as a bumper year in Latin America. This would mean that African growers would have both low harvest and low prices. The important point here is that the detrimental effect on the producing country is made worse by being part of an international system.

In addition, changes in consumption because of such events as economic booms and busts in consuming countries can be responded to only very slowly in producing countries because the coffee shrub generally takes five years to produce a mature crop. For example, new areas might be planted in response to an increase in demand that may be gone or have found alternative sources by the time the first bean is produced. Furthermore, once that five-year investment has been made by a grower, he or she is very lethal to pull up the plant in response to a market glut.

The governments of coffee-producing countries have historically tried to restrain these international fluctuations. In fact,
coffee was one of the first international commodities that the producing countries attempted to control. Most of these attempts were spearheaded by Brazil, which has been the largest producer of coffee. Despite Brazil’s dominance, the presence of Pacific and African producers and the increasing demand for Colombian and other Central American varieties created a global trading structure that was very difficult to unify into a trading bloc. Brazil was able to bring some stability to coffee prices in the early decades of the twentieth century, but this was quickly met with resistance in the consumer countries, especially in the United States. Public outrage over the “foreign” control of coffee prices led to political debates over what came to be called the “coffee question.” It was suggested that coffee importers should be proscribed for conspiracy to gauge consumers. Boycotts and a trade war were threatened.

**Economic Cosmopolitanism**

In response to these threats, coffee producers and other groups began an advertising and lobbying campaign to bring greater awareness of the effects of international trade. According to Jimenez, this campaign laid “the foundations for a new vision of the international order” (1995, 55). Coffee producers convinced politicians and even the general public that price fluctuations threatened the stability of governments that were important to the United States. This was a surprisingly effective argument in the 1940s and 1950s because of the fear of communism’s influence in Latin America. It was argued that unstable economies would produce unstable governments vulnerable to communist takeover. All of this brought increased awareness of the implications of being part of a global economy. Rather than considering only the local effects of price controls, Americans started to look at the global implications. Jimenez calls this way of looking at the world “economic cosmopolitanism,” and he argues that the coffee trade was “a singularly appropriate vehicle” for introducing this viewpoint into the United States (1995, 52).

Starting during World War II, economic cosmopolitanism led to a series of international agreements involving both producing and consuming countries in order to stabilize prices. The setting of prices moved out of the marketplace and into the back
The end of the ICA regime has profoundly affected the balance of power in the coffee chain. From a fairly balanced context between producers and consumers within the politics of the commodity agreement, market relations shifted to a dominance of consuming country-based operators (including their agents based in producing countries) over farmers, local traders and producing country governments. This has been accompanied by lower and more volatile coffee prices, a higher proportion of the income generated in the chain retained in consuming countries, and a declining level of producer-held stocks. (Ponte 2002, 1105)

It is quite correct to say that power has shifted to the consumer countries, but it is equally true to say that it has shifted to the consumer. In a sense, the free market ideology has meant that the governments of both the consumer and producer countries have been bypassed for a more market-driven relation between producers and consumers. When a consumer buys a cup of coffee, it has geographic, demographic, and political effects in the producer country. A complex, global network connects those who produce coffee in tropical, developing countries to coffee consumers in wealthy, temperate countries. Interwoven with the economic relation are particular political relations. In buying coffee, you support the free trade relation that prevents states from trying to control devaluing price fluctuations. You support representative regimes in coffee-growing countries. You support an economic system that entails disparity between the owners of the land and those who tend the crops. In other words, you support
an international inequality between producer and consumer countries and the inequality involved in the production of coffee. And, as we have argued, you do all of this anonymously, without knowing the people affected and without intending it.

Starting in the 1960s and building throughout the 1980s and 1990s, a new environmental damage was added to the social, political, and economic effects of the international coffee trade. Drives by increased demand and the desire to boost yields, coffee plantations switched from growing coffee under the shade of a tree canopy to sun coffee farming. This change produced a dramatic increase in both yields and environmental degradation (Wille 1990). Growing coffee under direct sunlight required a significant increase in the use of fertilizers, herbicides, fungicides, and insecticides. The cutting down of the shade trees also eliminated a vibrant habitat for wildlife. Furthermore, buyers get a less expensive product and consumers get a product of more consistent quality. Consequently, shade coffee requires a commitment to priorities other than making money or providing consumers with an inexpensive and consistent product.

In a very real sense, this social and ecological devastation is also caused by the coffee consumer. However, because of an international trading system, this damage is never seen by the consumer. One way to retro these problems would be to convince consumers to buy shade-grown coffee. However, shade-grown coffee is more expensive, the quality is not as consistent, and there are no health benefits to the consumer because the pesticides used to grow sun coffee are purged during roasting. What is required is for consumers to become aware of the anonymous effects of their consumption and to make consumer decisions based on the people involved rather than the product's quality and price. This is where we return to Starbucks.

The Latte Revolution and Fair Trade

Recent years have seen a surge in consumer demand for specialty coffees. The change in consumer taste cannot be understood without looking at Starbucks. Starbucks was founded in 1971 in Seattle and spent most of the 1980s "educating" consumers on the qualities of fine coffees. However, the company did not really take off until it designed a reproducible cafe-type environment for the
coffee consumer. It was Starbucks the milieu, rather than Star-
bucks the coffee, that triggered the company’s growth and spread. 
Howard Schultz, the CEO of Starbucks, described it this way: “We 
would take something old and tired and common—coffee—and 
weave a sense of romance and community around it. We would 
rediscover the mystique and charm that had swirled around cof-
tee throughout the centuries” (quoted in Ducum and Luttinger 
1999, 115). Ponte calls this the “late revolution” and claims that 
“coffee bar chains sell an ambiance and a social positioning more 
than just ‘good’ coffee” (2002, l’111). Furthermore, he connects this 
change with a more general change in consumer culture: 
This happened at the same time as other consumer 
products moved from mass-production and marketing 
to being recast as more authentic, flavorful and 
healthy (microbrewed beer, specialty breads, organic 
vegetables). By combining “ambience” consumption and 
the possibility for consumers to choose type, 
origin, roast, and grind, Starbucks managed to de-
commoditize coffee. It sold coffee pre-packaged with 
lifestyle signifiers (ibid.) 
This decommodification of coffee—the transformation of 
coffee from just the product of anonymous producers to a sign of a 
lifestyle—provided an opportunity for a new relation between 
the consumer and the producer. Consumers became interested 
not just in the quality and price of the coffee, but in what the pur-
chase of coffee said about the consumer’s values. This opened up 
the possibility for a change in the anonymous inequality of global 
consumer culture. Coffee has been one of the first commodities 
where this new possibility has begun to express itself. 
The growth of “lifestyle” coffee consumption has been ac-
accompanied by consumer interest in organic coffee, shade-grown 
coffee, and “Fair Trade” coffee. Fair Trade refers to a movement 
that aims to achieve a fair price for small coffee growers. Begin-
ing in 1988 from a small Dutch organization, the Fair Trade 
movement became international in 1997 with the establishment of 
the Fair Trade Labeling Organizations International. Its founders 
hoped to offset the effects of global economic forces on poor coun-
tries by establishing a minimum price for coffee. It includes a dis-
tribution system based on small, democratically run cooperatives 
with shared profits. Despite the fact that Fair Trade coffee is more
expensive, does not taste better, and provides no direct benefit to the consumer. It is one of the fastest-growing specialty coffees, although it still makes up only about 2 percent of the market. Just as Starbucks has been at the center of re-creating coffee as a lifestyle commodity, it has also been at the center of the Fair Trade controversy. In both cases, Starbucks’s role is primarily symbolic. Starbucks created itself as a brand and a milieu and has now become a symbol of the anonymous inequality of a consumer culture.

In the fall of 1999, groups in favor of Fair Trade began to organize protests, letter-writing campaigns, and boycotts against Starbucks, not because Starbucks was particularly egregious, but because it was such a potent symbol. At first, Starbucks resisted the protesters’ demand to sell Fair Trade coffee because those beans were not as consistently high quality as sun-grown coffee. However, realizing its dependence on symbols of lifestyle and its vulnerability to such protests, Starbucks soon capitulated and began to offer Fair Trade coffee in its stores as well as developing worker and consumer education programs. It was not long before Starbucks positioned itself as a leader in this movement. Its literature now stresses its role in conservation, workers’ welfare, and development in coffee-growing countries.

When we look at Starbucks, we do not see an evil empire, just as any fair look at the WTO will not see a cabal of multinationalists out to wreak environmental havoc. What we see instead are mainly contradictions: a progressive company, treating their workers well, responding to organized social demands, trying to provide their customers with inexpensive consistent quality, and contributing to ecological damage in developing countries. With the WTO, we see an international organization trying to address trade disputes and ending up harming endangered species. Similarly, we see contradictions in the response to global consumer culture, for example, people who smash the windows of Starbucks while wearing clothing from The Gap.

These are the sort of contradictions that we get with anonymous inequality. Here, the people being treated unequally are not stigmatized. In fact, they may be very much admired, as the Starbucks coffee drinker may admire the people who work on the coffee plantations. But the actions of the Starbucks drinker nevertheless harm those who work on the coffee plantation. Because they are the result of a global system of anonymous inequality, these harms are extremely difficult to see.
It may be possible through research to discover some of the damage, as well as the good, done to a producer country through our consumption. However, this information is not immediately available at the point of purchase. When we are deciding on our purchase, we normally have only two sources of information. The first is the product itself, which is often on display, but even when it is not displayed, we can inspect the product after our purchase and it can inform subsequent consumption.

The second source of information is the price. For most consumers, this information is either related to what can be afforded or used to contrast with comparable objects. The price, in fact, contains much more information. In the price is contained information about the growing season in the producer country, shipping costs, marketing strategies, government policies, and so forth. All of these are reflected in the price, but it is not an easy task to untangle all of this information from the pure numbers of the price.

Other kinds of information are next to impossible to factor into the price or they may show up in an inverted way. For example, while economic costs usually show up in the price, social and ecological costs usually do not. Economic costs such as broken-down factories, outmoded equipment, and inefficient workers are reflected in the higher price of the product. In making their selection, the consumer usually will not buy higher-priced, lower-quality goods, and therefore the producers who have created these economic costs are punished. However, many social and political costs actually lower the price, and consequently producers who add to those costs may be rewarded. In the case of coffee, we have seen that sun-grown coffee causes more environmental damage, and yet it lowers the price of the coffee. Going only on price and product, consumers will tend to buy sun-grown coffee, even though it causes environmental damage.

We can assume that at least some consumers would be willing to buy more expensive coffee that causes less environmental damage, however it is not easy for consumers to know which coffee causes more or less environmental damage. This is particularly true in cases where there is a “distance” between the producer and the consumer. In other words, when the producer is
next door, we are more able and willing to include the social and environmental costs in our consumption decision, but when the consumer is across the globe, it is more difficult to see the social and environmental costs, and we are less motivated to take them into consideration.

The idea of distance is discussed by Thomas Princen (2002). He defines distance as the separation between decisions about production and decisions about consumption. Princen analyzes distance along four dimensions, three of which are important for our discussion here: geography, culture, and agency. Distance along any of these dimensions makes it difficult to get my information that is not contained in the product or the price.

The first dimension of distance, geography, is the easiest to understand. It is the actual physical distance between the producer and the consumer. Social and political damage that many would object to in their own locale can be tolerated when it occurs thousands of miles away. Even if the consumer is concerned about what happens in those faraway countries, the geographic distance makes it difficult to get the information necessary to make an informed choice.

The second dimension is cultural distance. We often know very little about the culture in which our products are produced. I may, for example, be able to find out how much a worker is paid, but I still might not know what the amount means in that culture. A dollar a day sounds meager to someone living in the United States, but it may or may not be a fair wage in Brazil. Furthermore, I have no idea whether production decisions are being forced on the people through coercion and poverty or whether these people have knowingly traded environmental damage for economic benefit. To make matters worse, cultural distance allows those who benefit from these practices to misrepresent the culture that is being damaged. Geographic distance can be overcome simply by travel, but cultural distance requires someone who will explain what things mean to those involved, and those who do the explaining may have their own agenda.

The third dimension is the distance created by the chain of agents—people and organizations—that connect the producer and the consumer (see figure 5.1). International commodities, such as coffee, must pass along a chain made up of workers, landowners, government inspectors, wholesale buyers, shippers, roasters, and so forth, all of the way to the consumer. It is important to remember two things about this chain of agents. First, each
person and organization along the line has its own particular interests that may or may not coincide with the producers or the consumers. Second, every exchange along that chain is liable to be unequal in the power that the agents have in the transaction. This imbalance is especially strong in international exchange because agents from rich countries might have many more choices about who to buy from than the choices that poorer countries have on who to sell to. In addition, the economics of processing and shipping require huge capital investments in such things as factories and cargo ships, so that those agents are likely to be much more powerful than such agents as workers.

Because of this chain of agents, information about the ecological and social damage of production may not be passed from producer to consumer even in cases where both ends of the chain want that information to be shared. Every link in the chain typically involves two agents, and if either of those agents want to suppress the information, it will most likely be stopped at that point.

The greater the distance along any of these dimensions, the more difficult it is for the consumer to have any effect on the production of the commodity. This will happen even where both producers and consumers are honest and concerned about social and environmental damage, but it is especially likely when it is in the interest of some party to manipulate the flow of information in order to continue with practices that cause social and environmental damage. In particular, this will happen where those who benefit have access to advertising campaigns or lobbying.

It is our belief that much of the harm done by consumer society is due to this distance: Environments are destroyed, people are displaced, inequality is allowed to increase because of the distance that exists in the anonymous relations of global capitalism.

There are basically two ways that this problem of distance can be addressed. First, one can attempt to decrease the distance by doing such things as buying local to decrease geographic distance, traveling to and learning about other cultures to decrease cultural distance, and encouraging producer or consumer cooperatives to decrease agency distance. Where these measures are not feasible, the only alternative is a more organized response that attempts to bridge the distance with the express interest of minimizing environmental and social damage. There are different ways of organizing this response—political protest, governmental regulations, import laws, or international bodies—but perhaps the most popular in our consumer society has been the boycott.
Boycott Movements

Because the environmental damage and anonymous inequality seem to be caused by consumer culture, it makes sense to many to attempt to fix it through consumption. We have seen previously that a consumer boycott was used against Starbucks. This was only the latest in a long history of consumer boycotts (see table 5-3). They all have in common an interest in turning consumer choice into a political force. A boycott is an attempt to achieve objectives by urging individual consumers to " refrain from making selected purchases. It mobilizes the defining practice of consumer culture usually in order to achieve goals that are against the tendencies of consumer culture, that is, for non-economic goals.

The term boycott originated in a movement by Irish peasants to ostracize an English lord agent, Captain Boycott, in the 1880s, but the practice started long before this. One of the more famous is the American boycott of English products dramatized by the Boston Tea Party, which led up to the American Revolutionary War. During the 1760s, numerous political groups organized consumer boycotts of British goods, especially those, such as tea, that were heavily taxed. The list of boycotted goods also included silks, velvets, clocks, watches, and coaches. Tim Breen describes how these consumer boycotts helped to create a national identity: "Americans discovered political ideology through a discussion of the meanings of goods, through observances of non-consumption that forced ordinary men and women to declare exactly where they stood on the great constitutional issues of the day" (1993, 230).

At about the same time as the American boycott of British goods, a campaign developed with many similarities to the case of coffee discussed previously: the boycott of slave-grown sugar (Sussman 2000). Religious groups and other abolitionists began a boycott in England and America against sugar grown in the West Indies. It was argued that the apparently harmless practice of eating sugar supported slavery through the world trade network.

Boycotts also were successfully used as a supplement to labor strikes. Unions had a difficult time carrying out effective strikes in the early twentieth century because it was relatively easy for employers to replace striking workers. Early labor leaders saw the boycott as a consumer counterpart to the strike. This practice continues, but its last notable success was in the 1970s...
Table 5.3: Historical Time Line of Consumer Boycotts

1306: The practice of boycotting is documented as far back as the fourteenth century.

1766: Religious groups and other abolitionists begin a boycott in England and America against slave sugar grown in the West Indies.

1806: The term boycott originates in 1880 with the ostracism of Captain C. C. Boycott, an Irish land agent, over his treatment of his tenants.

1902: A mass boycott is initiated largely by women on New York's Lower East Side who protest sharp price increases, which they blame on oligarchic control over the beef industry.

1930s: The “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign encourages African Americans, particularly women, to support African American businesses.

1947: Gandhi promotes Satyagraha (nonviolent political protest) by organizing boycotts of British salt and cloth as part of a strategy of nonviolent protest that ultimately leads to Indian independence.

1955: Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat on a city bus to a white man, triggering the Montgomery bus boycott, a pivotal event in the Civil Rights Movement.

Late 1960s: Boycott of Dow Chemical's Saran Wrap in response to the company's manufacture of napalm in the Vietnam War.

The California grape, colony, and grapefruit boycott, spearheaded by Cesar Chavez, unites farmworkers. This forces concessions from the growers by the early 1970s.

1970s: Naafi, the world's largest baby food manufacturer, is boycotted between 1974 and 1984. The boycott is reinstated in 1998 after the World Health Authority determined that information contained in its advertisements for baby formula is either misleading or incorrect.

1980s: Gay rights groups boycott Florida citrus products in response to anti-gay rhetoric by singer Anita Bryant, which leads Florida citrus commissioners to end an endorsement contract with the singer.

1984: The Urban Alliance on Racism Relations launches a mail-back campaign whereby every catalog or flyer that does not reflect the multicultural composition of the local population is mailed back to the respective corporations with a note to the president and advertising director explaining why.

1988: Barclays Bank withdraws from South Africa, despite being the largest bank in the country, primarily as a result of a consumer boycott against South African apartheid. The boycott of companies doing business in South Africa becomes a global movement, critical in the eventual downfall of apartheid.

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European boycott of Shell over its plan to dump the Brent Spar oil platform at sea and reports of environmental harm as a result of its operations in Ogoniland, Nigeria.

Boycotts of Tesco in the United States over alleged racial remarks by senior management.

Boycotts of Mitsubishi over alleged sexual harassment in the workplace and, according to the Rainbow Action Network, for environmental degradation around its manufacturing plants.

A multi-country boycott of Nike over alleged sweatshop conditions at Asian suppliers.

Aron’s recognizable sign, “Aron calling,” is replaced with “Aron killing” in media spots promoting animal testing. Benetton and Revlon are similarly targeted.

McDonald’s is consistently attacked for environmental practices such as deforestation, as a result of its need for cattle, palm oil, and because it is viewed as a threat of American imperialism and thus boycotted across Europe after the United States invaded Iraq in 2003. In 1999, French antiglobalization farmer Jose Bove destroyed the building site of a McDonald’s restaurant in the southwestern French town of Millau. A McDonald’s restaurant was blown up in Athens in 1999 by an anarchist group, and others are blown up by its比利

Feenie and Bumble Bee Seafoods are boycotted for using nets for catching tuna that also capture and kill dolphins.

General Electric is boycotted for manufacturing military weapons.

2000-2003: Starbucks is boycotted by antiwar protesters in Lebanon and criticized by New Zealand advocate seeking higher coffee prices for farmers.

Source Notes:


with the boycott of celery, grapes, and grapefruit spearheaded by Cesar Chavez, which was able to unionize farmworkers when all previous efforts and methods had failed.

Even outside the labor movement, most early boycotts had economic motivations. For example, the 1942 meat boycotts were sparked by sharp increases in retail meat prices orchestrated by a

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cartel of meatpackers. These boycotts typically involved the poor, often recent immigrants to America. Similarly motivated by economic concerns were consumer leagues, which also threatened boycotts in order to protest high prices. These leagues generally involved women activists. The earliest such organization, the National Consumer League, was founded in 1890. Another important group was the National Association of Housewives’ Leagues, established in 1912.

Some of these consumer leagues went beyond economic issues to address social concerns. Florence Kelley, the founding executive director of the National Consumer League, proclaimed that the aim of the organization was to “realize the power of the consumer so that workers received fair living wages, goods were produced under sanitary conditions, and the interests of the community were promoted” (Kelley 1986; see profile of Florence Kelley in chapter 6).

In addition to boycotts aimed at specific products, there is also a history of boycotts aimed at new types of consumption. There were campaigns against department stores, against chain stores, and against mail-order shopping. These boycotts were usually led by independent shopkeepers who were threatened by the changes in marketing, but they often found a resonance in those who saw that the changes threatened not just a particular merchant, but a way of life.

Furthermore, there has been a history of boycotts by African Americans, such as the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign in the 1930s. The idea behind this campaign was summarized by W. E. B. Du Bois, “If we once make a religion of our determination to spend our meager income so far as possible only in such ways as will bring us employment consideration and opportunity, the possibilities before us are enormous” (1985, 147). This and similar calls led to the formation of such consumer groups as the Housewives’ League of Detroit, which had 10,000 members in 1934 and encouraged African American women to support African American businesses.

Of course, the effectiveness of these boycotts depended on there already being some economic integration. Cities where African Americans bought mainly from African Americans were largely unaffected by boycotts. This is why boycotts in Atlanta, where white business depended heavily on African American purchasing, were highly effective (Warner 1974, 124).
Here, we see that the boycott has been used to confront both anonymous and stigmatizing inequality. Such boycotts still continue addressing inequality based on race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, as well as other forms of inequality.

Most of the boycotts discussed thus far were aimed at hurting the sales of the targeted company. The loss of consumer sales was believed to be the means for gaining concessions from the targeted firms. However, as consumption has become more of a symbolic activity, consumer boycotts have also become more symbolic. Friedman (1995) makes a useful distinction between “market” boycotts and “media” boycotts. It is media boycotts that have become increasingly important in our consumer culture.

Friedman illustrates the difference between market and media boycotts by pointing to the typical site that a boycott group would pick for their protest. “A marketplace-oriented group would be likely to demonstrate in front of a store selling a boycotted product, urging consumers not to buy the item. A media-oriented boycott, on the other hand, would be more likely to select the target firm’s headquarters, making sure that demonstrators were positioned in front of a company sign or logo, so that television cameras would be able to link these identifying visuals with the boycotters’ publicity materials” (1995, 188).

Media boycotts are more likely to use celebrities, disrupt stockholder meetings, protest at the homes and offices of business executives, host press conferences featuring photogenic “victims” of the corporate practices, and organize protest activities in public places that are unrelated, or only symbolically related, to the firm. Rather than time-intensive picket lines, they use media-friendly humor and irony, such as replacing Avon’s recognizable sign, “Avon calling,” with “Avon killing” to protest animal testing. Friedman describes one particularly effective tactic: “Involving children as activists. Environmental groups have been particularly successful doing this in support of the tuna boycott and the tropical timber boycott. The human interest value of these stories of activist schoolchildren was clear to the news media, which gave the stories wide coverage” (1995, 197). Because the aim is symbolic rather than to directly hurt sales, the boycott could actually be a “boycott.” For example, protest groups promoted a campaign in 1985 to buy products from New Zealand in support of that country’s ban on ships carrying nuclear weapons.

Beyond the tactics, the objectives of the boycotts have also
changed. The new media boycotts are less about economic self-interest and more about representing larger values. Instead of economic self-interest, media boycotts tend to aim at ethical or socially responsible actions. They include such issues as gender and racial inequality (e.g., tourism boycotts of Miami and Arizona), the environment (e.g., targeting Mitsubishi for their destruction of the rain forest), animal rights (e.g., Avon, Revlon, and Benetton for testing products on animals), and peace (e.g., General Electric for manufacturing military weapons).

Undoubtedly, the two most popular of these issues are animal rights and the environment. These two issues were absent from boycotts before the 1990s, but have become the major concerns of present-day media boycotts. Organizations such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, Earth First, and the Rainforest Action Network are now the major leaders in boycotts, even though the organizations did not exist twenty years ago. What these issues have in common is that they are intellectually simple and emotionally appealing. A picture of a dolphin entangled in a net or of a laboratory bunny quickly communicates a powerful symbolic message, as do many of the slogans associated with the movement such as "save the dolphins."

The fact that these media boycotts have larger ethical objectives also influences the targets of the boycotts. Marketplace boycotts trying to directly affect sales tended to target the most egregious of the companies. Media boycotts tend to target the most well known companies, regardless of the extent of their involvement in the objectionable activity. For example, in recent (2003) protests over the U.S. invasion of Iraq, McDonald's became a primary target of boycotts by European activists. A reporter for the New York Times explains why:

The fact that protesters are drawn to the Golden Arches in their quest to gain attention is an interesting example of brand power working in reverse. Many marketing experts contend that "branding" is not a logical process, that the most successful brands make an emotional connection with consumers. This also seems to be true at brand backlashes. Under happier circumstances, the McDonald's name and imagery can stand as shorthand for a quick, dependable U.S.-style meal. Now, it can be seen as standing for something else: the policies of the United States and its place in the world. (Walker 2003, C1)
Media boycotts target companies and especially brands that are well known and easy to identify, and where consumer violation of the boycotts will be visible. They especially target global companies. In some ways, corporations like Disney, Wal-Mart, and Nike have helped make themselves vulnerable to consumer actions. Their success in diversifying interests, buying out local competition, and transferring production to cheap labor markets abroad has created an "interconnectedness" in the global economy, which gives activists a lot of avenues to pursue (Ferguson 1997, 44).

Many of these media boycotts have been very successful. For example, Avon, Neutrogena, Benetton, and a slew of other cosmetics companies stopped animal testing. The primary targets of a tuna boycott, Heinz and Bumble Bee Seafoods, agreed to catch fish in a way that would avoid harming dolphins. A number of these companies publicly attributed their changed policies to the boycott campaigns. Nevertheless, there are limits to what can be accomplished through these boycotts. Media boycotts around complex issues are difficult to organize. Many companies are not well known enough to become the target of boycotts. Some goals do not have celebrity support or are not associated with photogenic victims.

All of these boycott movements have three things in common. First, they represent a democratization of protest, since they allow anyone who consumes to protest—even if not old enough to vote, or not a citizen, or a former felon. This has been especially important when large segments of the population have been disfranchised because they were women or colorized subjects. It should be noted, however, that economic differences become significant, since less care if the poor boycott a product.

Second, these movements attempt to bring to our attention the connection between the production of commodities and their consumption. The movements have argued that the buying of sugar was directly connected to the system of slavery that produced it, that the buying of clothes is connected to the sweatshops in developing countries, or that the buying of coffee is connected to ecological damage. The movements maintain that socioeconomic injustice and environmental damage, whether it happens around the world or around the corner, is enabled or hindered by the everyday purchases of the average consumer. At the same time, such movements recognize that the relation between producer and consumer is commodified and alienated. We are not
encouraged to go to Colombia to work alongside the coffee producer; instead, we demonstrate our concern through what we do or do not buy.

Third, these movements depend on an image of the powerful consumer. To begin with, we should realize that these boycotts are less a protest against consumer culture and more an attempt to introduce different values into it. The consumer is seen as the most important agent for effecting this change in values. In the case of coffee, the farmers, the local governments, and, to an extent, even the coffee chains are seen as puppets controlled by the consumers’ choices. The farmers must grow coffee in the most economical way, governments must allow or even encourage what is good for their gross national product, and coffee stores must sell what the consumer will buy. Only the consumer seems free to make choices between different values, for example, justice over profit or ecology over consistent taste. All other choices seem to be a chain of responses determined by the values of the consumer. This is another one of the contradictions of consumer culture. Those who engage in these boycotts believe more in the power of the consumer than does any advertising director or marketing executive.

Conclusion

The popularity of media boycotts signals a changed attitude to politics in our consumer culture. In chapter 2, we saw that the consumer has become the model for the citizen. Not only do people participate less as citizens—for instance, fewer and fewer people vote—but when people do participate they do so “in consumer mode” (Firat and Dholakia 1999, 103). Across the political spectrum, the figure of the consumer has become dominant. For conservatives, the government needs to get out of the way of the all-powerful and mostly beneficent capitalist economy that is run by and for the consumer. Liberals distrust the production side of the economy, but through the increasing popularity of boycotts, even liberals have pinned their hopes on the consumer. Rather than democracy representing the ability of people to form a common goal through open discussions, it has come to mean the ability to choose among prepackaged goals and candidates. In the widespread turn to boycotts, we see the culmination of the consumer
model of the citizen. Zachary Lyons, editor of 
 Quarterly, said the following: "People are recognizing that voting with their dollars has a lot more power than their political vote, because cor-
 porations actually have more power in Congress than the law-
 makers supposedly in charge" (quoted in Ferguson 1997, 44).

We cannot forget the benefits of a consumer culture. Ratio-
 nal people want material goods and there is nothing ignoble about that. Despite all of the advertising, public-relations cam-
 paigns, and shady marketing, consumer culture truly is an ex-
 pression of our freedom. A society driven by consumerism has led more people to clothe more people, and housed more people
 than any society in history. It has ever, as we argued in chapter
 4, subverted some important forms of inequality.

Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the disadvantages of a con-
 sumer society. The freedom of the individual consumer has lim-
 ited the freedom of the community. The society that has fed,
 clothed, and housed people has also damaged the environment
 and created more trash than any other society in history. In place of
 dignifying inequality, a more inscrutable anonymity in-
 equality has emerged.

Perhaps the most worrying aspect of consumer society is that
 our options for addressing its problems seem to be narrowing.
 Most people, for example, are deeply concerned about the eco-
 logical damage caused by consumption, but the response to it has
 been channeled into individual consumer choices. People do not
 aggregate over different government and community-based solu-
 tions; instead, they aggregate over whether they should use paper
 or plastic bags at the grocery store. The truth is that neither choice
 makes much difference given the current institutional structures,
 but the consumer approach to solving problems cannot change
 institutional structures or even talk about communal solutions.
 Consumer-based solutions involve recycling or buying a tree to
 plant or, as we discussed in chapter 3, buying commodities that
 symbolize our disgust with consumption. But no matter what its
 benefits, consumption cannot really solve its own problems. Per-
 haps we will consume our way out of a consumer culture, but it
 is more likely to be through a catastrophic destruction than by
 buying the simple life. The solution to the problems of consumer
 culture requires first an understanding of consumption's benefits
 and problems and second people that are able to act as citizens in-
 stead of as consumers.