

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

By: [Tad Skotnicki](#)

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Abstract:

At the turn of the twentieth century, the National Consumers' League, the Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative Guild encouraged people to become ethical consumers. I argue that we can explain their common strategies by invoking commodity fetishism. By casting their consumer activism as a practical response to the fetish of commodities, we explain: 1) activists' use of sensory techniques – both figurative and literal – to connect producers, commodities, and consumers and 2) their commitment to the ethical power of the senses. This account reveals the virtues of commodity fetishism as a tool for understanding the dynamics of consumer activism.

Keywords: consumer activism | Marx | phenomenology | capitalism

Article:

In Lawrence Glickman's landmark history of consumer activism in America, he identifies a "denigration of the importance of the senses" that accompanied the emergence of "modern consumer activism."¹ "The force of one's actions as a consumer," he writes, "typically extended far beyond the local, making it necessary to relegate the senses to a lesser order power, in favor of an understanding of the causal impact of consumption along the axis of distant markets."² As a consumer, one could not trust one's senses to ferret out the provenance of anonymous commodities, nor could one see the effects of one's actions on distant workers. Thus, to understand the consumer as responsible for workers' distant suffering entailed the degradation of the senses as a tool for consumer activists. Yet, I show how pioneering turn-of-the-twentieth century consumer activists in England and the United States appealed to consumers' senses in spite of such degradation. Such appeals sought to render the social relations of labor behind the commodity perceptible to consumers. Activists' encouraged consumers to perceive the working

conditions of physically and culturally distant laborers through both figurative and literal means – from elaborate written descriptions of workplaces to travelling exhibits of goods made in sweatshops. I call these tactics for generating collective action by connecting the labor process, commodities, and consumers, “sensory techniques.” These sensory techniques were premised on an assumption of the “ethical power of the senses” – that perceiving the working conditions behind the commodity would motivate habitual and selective ethical purchasing.

How can we explain consumer activists’ reliance on sensory techniques in a world where the senses are not trustworthy to decode mass-produced commodities? Following Bourdieu, one approach might examine the persistence of these sensory appeals as an expression or performance of socio-cultural and especially class-specific tastes.³ One might cast the sensory appeals of consumer activists as a way of playing on the sympathies of bourgeois consumers.⁴ But of the National Consumers’ League, Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women’s Co-operative Guild, the latter two drew primarily from the working classes. Another approach could explore the imaginative hedonism of consumers as soliciting such sensory appeals.⁵ In such an account, modern consumption involves an imaginative, emotional engagement with commodities for hedonistic or pleasurable reasons.⁶ Yet such an account would fail to appreciate the extent to which consumer activists pursued a very specific purpose in appealing to the senses: exposing the conditions under which culturally and physically distant others labored and branding them onto the commodities. Their imaginations were constrained to reconstruct the relation between the labor process and commodities from the perspective of consumers. Thus, the most promising direction for an explanation of activists’ reliance on sensory techniques comes from the nexus of material culture studies and consumption.⁷ By turning to material objects and concrete practices, we can specify how activists’ linked consumers, commodities, and the labor process. However, to build on such an approach we must guard against overemphasizing the material qualities of goods; after all, modern forms of consumer activism are concerned with distant, imperceptible others *and* the goods they produce.⁸

To explain why turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists relied on “sensory techniques”, I draw on Marx’s account of commodity fetishism. By casting consumer activism as a fraught engagement with commodity fetishism, I account for activists’ reliance on sensory techniques and their implicit commitment to the ethical power of the senses, despite the inability of consumers to perceive workers’ distant suffering. This article examines how turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists in England and the United States – the National Consumers’ League, the Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women’s Co-operative Guild – employed figurative and literal sensory techniques to render the distant suffering behind consumer goods sensible to consumers. I argue: to the extent that consumer activists employ sensory techniques to render the labor process perceptible to consumers, these techniques follow from one characteristic of commodity fetishism.

The argument proceeds as follows: first, I explain Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism. Further, I show how it describes consumers’ inability to perceive the social relations of production in the commodities they purchase. Then I discuss the historical context and significance of turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists in England and the United States. In particular, these activists sought to legitimize the consumer as a universal, socially powerful identity with responsibilities to all producers of commodities. Next, I examine the

sensory techniques employed by these consumer activists by drawing on meeting minutes, newspapers, publications, annual reports, conference reports, and propaganda. I show that these strategies connected the social relations of production to the commodity at the point of purchase by means of figurative and literal “seeing”. After contrasting turn-of-the-twentieth-century activists with abolitionist predecessors, I offer some suggestions for using commodity fetishism as an analytical tool for studying consumer activism and consumption. By explaining activists’ reliance on sensory techniques with reference to commodity fetishism, I contribute to a sociological and historical framework for understanding the dynamics and character of consumer activism.

Commodity Fetishism as a Problem of Consumer Sense

Marx's theory of commodity fetishism is controversial. Consequently, it is essential to clarify what commodity fetishism means as well as its implication for consumers before proceeding to the analysis. In the following section, I show that Marx's account of commodity fetishism points to a basic concern with consumer sense perception and use of goods in a capitalist society – the consumer's inability to perceive the social relations of production in the commodity at hand.

Marx describes commodity fetishism as a “definite social relation between men themselves which assumes...the fantastic form of a relation between things.”⁹ Often in a capitalist society, the social relations of commodity producers become evident only in the act of exchange. Exchange entails a relation between two commodities – money and the specific good or goods purchased. In exchange, the purchaser is unable to perceive the social relations of production that make the commodities possible. This is why Marx writes, “If I state that coats or boots stand in a relation to linen because the latter is the universal incarnation of abstract human labor, the absurdity of the statement is self-evident.”¹⁰ As described, commodity fetishism entails this inability to perceive the elaborated social organization of concrete labor relations as anything but immaterial, “suprasensible” aspects of the commodity form.¹¹ The labor process is fundamentally obscure to the consumer at the point of exchange.

Thus, one consequence of commodity fetishism is the inscrutability of a good's elaborate process of production to the consumer who receives it in exchange.¹² But from the perspective of the consumer, this inscrutability is not a problem of ignorance that can be remedied by teaching the consumer where goods come from; it inheres in a society characterized by the private production of goods for exchange on the market.¹³ Why? Because the commodity, as Marx repeatedly tells us, *appears* a trivial, obvious thing in the act of exchange.¹⁴ No amount of knowledge of where the good comes from resolves the experience or appearance of commodities in a capitalist society. This is one implication of Marx's statement that it was “absurd” to treat commodities as the “universal incarnation of abstract human labour.” As consumers, the experience of commodities and especially of exchange value as obvious things is not a perceptual error. Of course, it is surely the case that any elaborated pre-capitalist system of production (especially mercantile trade) would produce a similarly inscrutable commodity from the perspective of the consumer at the point of exchange. In a capitalist society, however, the issue of inscrutability becomes a normal or typical problem. For this reason, while this inscrutability may obtain in other historical modes of production, it is noteworthy that it has become a more common *collective* problem since the 1700s.¹⁵ In a capitalist society, consumer activists often express

their dissatisfaction with the market as a means of connecting production and consumption – the market obscures the character and value of commodities as objects involving real labor and real people. In this way, commodity fetishism offers a simple theory of consumer experience in a capitalist society characterized by the private production of goods for public exchange via the market.¹⁶

But why should we begin from the premise of commodity fetishism when seeking to analyze consumer activism? Such an approach challenges settled sociological wisdom in the studies of consumption. Many sociologists avoid Marxist theory in the study of consumption for at least two reasons: (1) it entails a negative evaluation of consumers and consumption¹⁷ and (2) it overlooks or ignores the varied meanings that consumers' develop themselves. With respect to the issue of negative assessments of consumption, one need not dig very deeply into Marx's writing to find statements that impugn consumers. For instance, Marx observes "by equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labor as human labour. They do this without being aware of it."¹⁸ One could take this as an indictment of delusional consumers and many do.¹⁹ But as I have suggested, commodity fetishism is usefully treated as a necessary practical response to the commodity form that can result in intellectual delusion.²⁰ In this way, we can appreciate the inescapable practical implications of commodity fetishism. From the abolitionist movement and early twentieth century consumer activists to the contemporary Anti-Sweatshop movement and the organic movement, groups have addressed their activism toward purchasers who cannot perceive the social relations of production across a range of different commodities – sugar, rum, clothing, and many others.

The second issue concerns Marx's indifference to the meanings that actors attribute to their own consumption. Just as with the first objection, there is a grain of truth to such claims. As Luke Sutherland argues, the section on commodity fetishism satirizes bourgeois economists and bourgeois consumers.²¹ Furthermore, Marx's system demonstrated little analytical interest in the consumer. But I argue that we can use commodity fetishism to illuminate the meanings that people attribute to consumption. In fact, we can draw on commodity fetishism to investigate the significance or meaning of purchasing practices within the broader context of the supply chain that makes it possible. Scholars of consumption remind us that people attribute meanings that are unconstrained by, or at least relatively independent of, processes of production and circulation.²² But consumers' inability to perceive the labor process behind commodities poses an issue for anyone who seeks to incorporate the processes of production and circulation into the meanings of purchasing in capitalist societies.²³

As a practical issue, commodity fetishism entails obscure relations between the labor process and commodity in the eyes (and senses) of the consumer.²⁴ But it does not follow that in invoking commodity fetishism, one reduces the meaning of consumption to the fetish of commodities alone. More importantly, if the researcher can show how the fetish of commodities becomes a problem for consumers, it *is* central to the meanings that those consumers attribute to their purchases. Turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists illustrate one such attempt to make the practical issue of commodity fetishism a problem for consumers. In general, consumer activism offers an opportunity to examine instances where people incorporate labor conditions into the meaning of consumer practices. To put it simply, for researchers commodity fetishism

can serve as a tool to account for the way that some consumers attribute meanings to purchases on account of the relations between the labor process, commodities, and consumers. Rather than override the meanings that people attribute to their purchasing, commodity fetishism can help explain one meaning for which activists often reach.

Who were Early 20th Century Consumer Activists?

At the turn of the twentieth century, the National Consumers' League, Co-operative Wholesale Society, and the Women's Co-operative Guild sought to illuminate the relations between producers and commodities for consumers. In the following section, I describe who these activists were as well as their historical context. These activists committed themselves to the consumer as an agent of social change in a way that legitimated the consumer as an ethical actor. As such, these activists offer a crucial case of modern consumer activism, instances of which have been evident since the Anti-Slavery campaigns of the eighteenth century up through the present. They identified consumers as *universal* actors with *moral responsibilities to distant others* and the social *power* to remedy unfavorable conditions.²⁵

The turn of the twentieth century was a watershed moment in the modern era, especially for consumption in the industrializing West.²⁶ The National Consumers' League, Co-operative Wholesale Society, and Women's Co-operative Guild were the prominent groups that sought to mobilize consumers in the period from 1880s until the end of World War I. During this period, England and the United States were the two wealthiest countries in the world, using GDP per capita.²⁷ Furthermore, in wealthy industrializing countries the figure of the consumer loomed large with the rise of trusts, growing mass production, and department store culture.²⁸ By placing consumer activism in an international framework, I depart from a tendency to explain such activism in terms of national dynamics.²⁹ To reconstruct their understanding of the consumer and their sensory techniques for creating ethical consumers, I rely on a range of archival sources: meeting minutes, newspapers, publications, annual reports, conference reports, and propaganda. The published sources were circulated among consumer activists themselves and used to reach the broader public. The minutes and reports provide a reliable window into activists' ideas, campaigns, and techniques.

To be sure, the socio-historical origins of these groups varied in details, which makes their convergence on sensory techniques all the more remarkable. The National Consumers' League grew out of efforts to address the working conditions of saleswomen. In 1891, a number of concerned women founded the Consumers' League of New York City. A federated National Consumers' League emerged eight years later. The League incorporated a host of regional and local groups of middle- and upper-class white women who sought to reform workplace conditions by encouraging ethical purchasing and state regulation of labor conditions. They did so by investigating working conditions, publicizing the frequently disturbing results, and organizing campaigns for ethical purchasing and legislative changes. In their constitution, they emphasized "the duty of consumers to find out under what conditions the articles they purchase are produced and distributed[.]"³⁰ The group participated in the efflorescence of voluntary reform work associated with the progressive era.³¹ Overall, the league membership counts reached upwards of 15,000 dues-paying members at the dawn of the First World War.³² But such

numbers underestimate the reach of the League as they often drew on larger networks of clergy and women's clubs to disseminate league campaigns broadly.³³

The Co-operative Wholesale Society has its roots in mid-nineteenth century England.³⁴ A group of working men sought to pool their purchasing power in order to cut out middlemen and find better prices on staple goods. The group developed local co-operative stores where members could purchase food, clothing, and household items. The stores were collectively owned by the members, who received a quarterly dividend on purchases made in the store. These local stores were incorporated into the CWS and members were encouraged to participate in annual meetings, local co-operative projects, and their communities. While they retained their working-class identity, by the 1880s and 90s the CWS began to tout the co-operatives as an organization of consumers.³⁵ In 1913, co-operator Percy Redfern employed this now common understanding to describe the ultimate purpose of the Co-operative movement. Redfern described the early co-operators as “voyagers” who came across an organic commonwealth accidentally “when they discovered the consumer, and found that everybody is a consumer and that an organization of consumers is an organized whole.”³⁶ Upon the outbreak of the First World War, the Co-operatives could claim over three million members and their total capital placed them as one of the twenty largest companies in England.³⁷

The Women's Co-operative Guild was formed to encourage women to take an interest in co-operative societies. In many co-operative societies, women were permitted to be members only through their spouses. To facilitate women's participation in the co-operative movement, several women formed an association of Co-operative women in 1883. By 1884, the group became known as the Women's Co-operative Guild. The Guild women were committed to the co-operative movement. But they did not always march in lockstep with the CWS. The Guild often challenged the CWS on issues ranging from the labor conditions of co-operative employees to divorce laws. However, like the NCL and the CWS these women were committed to the transformative power of consumers. Throughout the period, the Guild developed a robust program of social activism from investigations of workplace issues to the promotion of ethical purchasing. Their membership, while smaller than the CWS, grew to 30,000 members by the First World War.³⁸

These three groups shared a vision of the ethical consumer. In the words of co-operator Percy Redfern's, the co-operators discovered that everybody is a consumer. Members of the Women's Guild agreed in principle, but endorsed Beatrice Webb's clarification, “[t]he unit of the co-operative movement is the *customer* – almost invariably a woman.”³⁹ Both treated co-operation as a consumers’ movement – one that represents the consumer as fundamental. Similarly, Florence Kelley of the NCL asserted: “The first principle of the league is universality. It recognizes the fact that in civilized community every person is a consumer.”⁴⁰ Furthermore, the consumer was universal as opposed to the partisan interests of businessmen and laborers.

The consumer was also socially powerful. Each group identified the consumer as an “employer” of sweatshop and tenement labor.⁴¹ They proposed that consumers – not producers or owners – dictated the social relations of production. Most strikingly, the NCL insisted that “the majority of employers are virtually helpless to maintain a high standard as to hours, wages, and working conditions under the stress of competition[.]”⁴² One CWS member portrayed laborers or

businessmen as “powerless” when compared to consumers.⁴³ Members of the Women's Guild described consuming as “the greatest of all earthly powers.”⁴⁴

While the power rested with consumers, so did responsibility for working conditions – the third feature of this shared understanding of the consumer. As an “employer” of labor, the consumer was responsible for choices that contributed to poor labor conditions. The NCL wrote consumer's moral duties into their constitution: “the responsibility for some of the worst evils from which producers suffer rest with consumers who seek the cheapest markets regardless how cheapness is brought about.”⁴⁵ Similarly, co-operators were keen to remind people of their duties as consumers. A member of the Women's Guild noted that “the strongest reason...in favor of co-operative production has been that it meant good wages, shorter hours, and good conditions for the workers.”⁴⁶ A co-operative op-ed about the “sweated” manufacture of matches, for instance, conjoined laments about suffering workers with a reminder of the purchaser's duty.⁴⁷

This commitment to the ethical consumer sometimes resulted in conflicts with laborers, many of whom took umbrage with the claim that consumer deserved a privileged role in social life. For the most part, the NCL, CWS, and the Women's Guild sought to generate little conflict with labor reformers – whether socialist radicals, trade unionists, or paternalistic conservatives. The NCL – a decidedly upper-middle class, women's group led by a socialist – sought to remain nonpartisan. They supported working people, especially women and children without appearing to be a labor group.⁴⁸ In practice, this meant that the NCL worked more closely with trade unions and politicians, many of whom were paternalistically concerned to prevent civil unrest in contrast to the more radical wing of the labor movement.⁴⁹ Both the CWS and the Women's Guild styled themselves as a movement for working-class improvement. In fact, many co-operators were members of trade unions.⁵⁰ But they often privileged the consumer identity over that of the worker. This resulted in conflicts with trade unions, especially when they attempted to unionize co-operative industries. Concerns about labor sometimes put the Guild at odds with the CWS, especially in the early 1900s when the Guild supported a union of co-operative store employees in their conflict with the CWS over an increase in the minimum wage.⁵¹ In any case, co-operators positioned themselves as friends of labor and as a movement to transform society from competitive to co-operative principles. Practically, co-operators sat uneasily between trade unionists and radical socialists. For both groups, however, their commitment to the consumer shaped their interactions with other labor reformers. Their relations with labor reformers underscore the distinctively positive spin that activists placed on the consumer as an agent of social change.

Consumer Activists' Sensory Techniques

In promoting the ethical consumer, the NCL, CWS, and the Women's Guild attempted to render the social relations of labor behind the commodity perceptible to consumers. I distinguish between two sensory techniques: figurative and literal. Figurative techniques involve the use of sensory language to encourage consumers to imaginatively perceive the labor process behind the commodities they purchased. By expanding consumers' capacity to perceive the social relations of labor behind commodities, these activists hoped to motivate ethical purchasing. Literal techniques depended on consumers' senses – usually vision – to associate commodities with previously invisible working conditions and to see them with their own eyes. Often literal

techniques and figurative techniques were intertwined. But literal techniques demonstrate that consumer activists relied on more than language and imagination in their efforts to stimulate ethical purchasing. In both figurative and literal sensory techniques, these activists' reconstructed consumers' sense perceptions to encourage ethical purchasing. In doing so, they addressed the obscurity of the labor process in consumers' engagements with commodities.

I have called this tendency to rely on the power of sense perception – figurative or literal – to compel ethical action a commitment to the ethical power of the senses. We can distinguish activists' sensory techniques and commitment to the ethical power of the senses by focusing on the collective action problem activists wanted to solve. For instance, one may imagine that turn-of-the-twentieth marketers appealed to the senses in similar ways. Marketers certainly aimed to overwhelm the senses and induce purchasing through elaborate shop window displays, store demonstrations, posters, and much more.⁵² However, while turn-of-the-twentieth-century marketers may have used ostensibly similar techniques, it is fair to say that marketers were unconcerned with the consumers' relations to laborers and encouraging ethical purchasing. For activists, consumers' invisible relations to laborers contributed to the collective action problem of inducing ethical purchasing.

Figurative Appeals to the Senses

The NCL, the CWS, and the Women's Guild suffused their rhetoric with sensory metaphors and imagery to encourage ethical purchasing. These figurative strategies took two distinct, but interrelated forms. First, activists used sensory language or metaphors to describe changes in consciousness. The sensory powers were a means of encouraging moral action. Such sense metaphors are common in Western culture and do not in and of themselves tell us anything about activists' engagement with commodity fetishism.⁵³ Second, activists' employed sensory language to make consumers perceive or imagine the social conditions of labor and attach such images to commodities. This language reveals consumer activists' concern with commodity fetishism. Such enhanced perceptions attempted to represent the social relations of production to consumers by means of the commodity. Moreover, they were intended to motivate a specific act – ethical purchasing. Further, I show that these distinct figurative techniques were often employed together. In the process, even generic sensory metaphors for consciousness intimated the consumer's ability to imagine the conditions of production.

In official publications and literature, consumer activists used sensory metaphors, especially visual ones, to describe the transformation in consciousness that consumer activists desired. In the League's Second Annual Report, Florence Kelley described the NCL as a “practicable method” for mobilizing the pity and ethical sentiments of consumers. Later in the report, Kelley asked whether purchasers could be induced to give preference to justly made goods, by which league members meant goods made in clean environments by workers treated fairly. In addition to growing numbers of Consumers' League members, Kelley answered with the following: “In view of our investigation, the bargain counter is seen in a new light...The point is henceforth to *know how the cheapness of our bargains is attained*.”⁵⁴ The task of the consumer activist was to attach emotions such as pity to the knowledge of existing conditions. Where could one turn to induce such an attachment? The NCL sought to cultivate a spirit that “...changes passive approval, appropriation, and sympathy into that dynamic conscience which constrains its owner

to *look* into a subject and act upon the convictions gained in *looking*.”⁵⁵ Kelley employed a visual metaphor for the League's work to transform consciousness. By looking into the origins of the commodities they buy, consumers would learn to purchase justly.

Percy Redfern, a prominent member of the CWS, identified producing and consuming powers, with a clear sensory bent: “The powers of producing and consuming are to the normal human being as left hands and right. Or, better still, the hands are the producers, and the mouth that eats and the eyes that see the beauty of the world are consuming powers and those that feed the desires of the heart by which the hands are governed.”⁵⁶ The consuming powers – vision and taste – nourished the heart and by extension *guided* the hands that produced. In this vein, the Women's Guild rendered an iconic image of “The Woman with the Basket”, woven basket resting on her knee, gazing out across an urban, industrial landscape into a sunlit sky (Figure 1). This woman possessed the earthly power to shape and reshape not only what was produced, but the lives of those that produced it. She was depicted in terms of her power to see beyond her immediate surroundings. Taken on their own, however, these sensory metaphors for knowledge and consciousness reflect a common use in Western culture.



Figure 1. The Women with the Basket, an image published in the Co-operative News, 01/02/1909; Courtesy of the Co-operative Women's Guild.

But activists' commonly blended sensory language for consciousness with sensory language aimed to bridge the gap between producers and consumers. This blending shows how these sense metaphors address the fetish of the commodity; they did not merely reflect a generic tendency to associate the senses with imagination and consciousness. Perceiving the cloistered processes of production became the source of conviction – a means of transfiguring passive sympathy into an active ethical practice. One member of the Women's Guild captured this sentiment in an 1892 essay entitled "Shopping": "It does seem strange, when we think of it, how lightly and thoughtlessly we go out shopping, how easily we let the money slip through our fingers, money that has cost thought and toil and weariness." Later in the essay the author, a member of the Women's Guild identified as Katy, lamented, "If we could only have a 'magic mirror' that would show us the beginning and end of the 'bargains' and cheap goods which look so attractive...we should need no more arguments."⁵⁷ Her sympathetic prose invited readers to peer into the dingy, desolate rooms where anonymous goods were produced and to see the "pale women and girls" who produced them. Moreover, her use of 'we' asked readers to identify as a consumer, whose duty it was to remedy inhumanely sweated labor and other unjust conditions through conscientious purchasing. In describing the work of the Consumers' League of New York, Maud Nathan drew on sensory metaphors to render the "dark places" where "unseen and unheard" workers toiled in dismal conditions. Like Katy, Nathan reported, "those who go down into the depths, never return with the same light hearts."⁵⁸ Sensory metaphors dramatized a change in consciousness and revealed the social relations of production behind commodities.

Members of Co-operatives and the NCL employed sensory metaphors in their laments about consumers' failure to perceive as well. An editorial on "The Poor Consumer", a popular figure in co-operative rhetoric, bemoaned the noxious influence of advertising on the consumer and asked, "Will the consumer also awaken from his long Rip van Winkle sleep and rub his eyes till the truth dawns upon him?"⁵⁹ Florence Kelley suggested that a failure to see undermined the power of the purchaser: "The power of the purchaser, which is potentially unlimited, becomes great, in practice, just in proportion as purchasers become organized and enlightened, place themselves in direct communication with the producers, inform themselves exactly concerning the conditions of production and distribution, and are able thus to enforce their own will instead of submitting to the enticement and stimulus of the unscrupulous advertising seller."⁶⁰ The failure to see also allowed consumers to be manipulated by unscrupulous merchants and advertisers. In an article from 1908, Kelley described the responsibilities of the consumer to the "unseen young servants" who both manufacture and deliver goods.⁶¹ These visual metaphors provided tools for consumers to perceive the social organization of labor in their engagement with commodities. Furthermore, they steeled the consumer against the appeals of advertisers, who made it more difficult to overcome the mystifications of the commodity form in practice.

Sometimes, consumer activists lamented their dependence on sensory techniques. In justifying the League's exhibits (next section), Florence Kelley expressed her frustration with visual overstimulation: "We are an eye-minded nation. We love shows and pictures of all kinds. We buy our food and clothes according to the shop window displays, or to pictures and legends painted on barns and hoardings, or printed on the covers of magazines...the multitude of thoughtless spenders are guided by their eyes."⁶² But Kelley's lament did not precede a call for different techniques. Rather, she treated this sensory dependence as a fact: "The exhibit is

prepared and kept in circulation in recognition of these facts.”⁶³ Co-operators expressed similar concerns. One co-operator explained that a longstanding suspicion of advertising “died hard”, despite the ill-effects on co-operative trade: “Paint, paste, and polish would not be necessary, and glare and glitter could very well be done without.”⁶⁴ Many co-operators viewed advertising as manipulation, which clashed with the co-operative educational mission. But despite these reservations, both co-operators and the NCL did their best to appeal to the “eye-minded nation.”

Overall, these figurative techniques involved attempts to transform consciousness and to render the social relations of producers sensible to consumers at the point of exchange. While it would be a mistake to claim that all of activists’ figurative techniques were a response to the fetish of commodities, those imaginative attempts to illuminate obscure chains of working conditions *and* connect them to consumer goods clearly did so. Furthermore, I have shown that activists’ often combined these figurative strategies in practice. The combination of figurative techniques reveals how attempts to penetrate the commodity fetish reshaped the meaning of consumption for activists. Rather than replicate a common linguistic practice, activists’ used sensory language in an attempt to unmask the fetish of commodities. Thus, when Florence Kelley identified the “convictions gained in looking”, this language resonated with the attempt to unmask the commodity form. In fact, Kelley employed that language in response to the question, “could purchasers be induced to give the preference to goods made under the right conditions.”⁶⁵ These sensory metaphors advanced the project of ethical purchasing explicitly. For consumer activists, to look into the issue of one’s purchasing decisions required one to imaginatively perceive the labor that resulted in the commodity. Both figurative appeals suggested the ethical power of the senses – a connection between perceiving unjust working conditions and righteous purchasing. For the NCL, the CWS, and the Women’s Guild, these figurative sensory techniques would encourage ethical purchasing by drawing a connection between the labor process and the commodity from the perspective of the consumer.

Literal Appeals to the Senses

But activists’ employed more than figurative sensory techniques to encourage consumers to perceive the working conditions behind the commodity: they wanted consumers to use their physical senses to literally perceive these working conditions. Upon opening a copy of the Second Annual Report of the National Consumers’ League (1900-1901), one finds an image of the League label, shaped like a bowtie, with the following phrase: “Goods bearing the above label are made in factories in which – The State factory law is obeyed; All the Goods are made on the premises; Overtime is not worked; Children under sixteen years of age are not employed.”⁶⁶ The use of a label demonstrates one central way that NCL techniques rested upon literal and not only figurative senses. The label allowed the consumer to associate metaphorical images of the production process with particular commodities. Affixed to articles of clothing, the label encouraged imaginative engagements with the commodity. Through a specific act of seeing a branded or labeled commodity, consumer activists conjured up images of clean, just workplaces in contrast with dirty, unjust ones. But I show that such literal techniques went beyond indirect labeling strategies, which associated mental images of the workplaces with specifically labeled commodities; they often relied on the circulation of workplace photographs as well as public and private exhibitions of just and unjust goods. These literal techniques involved photography and methods of display such as exhibitions and lantern lectures. As with

figurative techniques, literal ones were accompanied by an implied commitment to the ethical power of the senses.

The NCL, CWS, and the Women's Guild used labeling strategies to encourage ethical consumption. Such strategies remain closely bound to figurative ones as labels did not literally depict the workplaces where commodities were produced. For the NCL, the label was a tool for activating ethical senses. The League supplied approved factories with the label, which the manufacturers affixed to the goods – typically clothing – in the factory. When the goods arrived at the shops, the label was already attached. Because the NCL did not operate their own stores, it was vital for them that the label remained affixed to the goods. The label bridged the commodity and figurative perception of the labor process through an act of literal seeing. If it was stripped from the clothes, this undermined the label's purpose of uniting the good and the labor process. Members of the Consumers' League of New York raised the issue that some stores were removing the League label *prior* to putting the goods out for sale. In the words of one member, "New York merchants frequently 'hide their light under a bushel' and though selling garments properly bearing our label frequently cut it off, or stow the clothes away in such quiet corners that customers are not aware of their presence."⁶⁷ League members were concerned with the invisibility of the label, which suggests that actually seeing the label affixed to particular commodities mattered. It was a sensory tool for activating the implied ethical senses and inducing ethical purchasing.

The Co-operatives pursued a distinctive but analogous attempt to label goods. Because the CWS were merchants, they could be relatively certain that co-operative goods would bear the label.⁶⁸ One who saw the C.W.S. brand would be able to envision a clean, wholesome workplace where the employees were paid and treated well. Like the NCL, co-operators presented their brand as a bridge between literal and figurative strategies to encourage ethical purchasing. As such, many co-operative advertisements took pains to show that the products were made under "the best conditions of labor."⁶⁹ In co-operative publications, one can find in-depth descriptions of co-operative goods at various moments in the supply chain. An account of co-operative tea, for instance, began with the tea plantations and ended in the London factory where the tea was cured and packaged.⁷⁰ Such accounts included pictures of the workers and their environment. But it was not always easy to maintain the integrity of the co-operative brand and label. In 1906, when they discovered that sweated laborers in London were producing matchboxes with the Co-operative label, co-operators opined that the co-operatives claimed to produce "pure" goods, even if they were not able to "scent" out traces of sweating in every case.⁷¹ The editors contrasted the "scent of the sweater", which was difficult to trace, with the case of the matchboxes, which had "come to light." Thus the possibility of keeping the label pure rested on the ability to uncover and see sweatshop conditions in a figurative sense. Co-operators relied on this figurative and literal sense to secure appropriate action, i.e. ethical purchasing. Provided that co-operators could preserve the integrity of the brand, actually seeing a co-operative label would allow consumers to imagine fair working conditions in contrast to a sweatshop. The label was a tool for associating the commodity with images of the labor process – figurative or literal.

But labels did not conjure their own images, rather they relied on others. For instance, activists' relied on photography to allow consumers to see into the labor process. The NCL circulated published photographs of working conditions extensively. Between 1905 and 1914, the NCL

Annual Reports included photographs of tenement working conditions that identified the goods produced there, from cigars and artificial flowers to clothing and bread.⁷² One report included photographs of flower makers, home workers finishing garments in a New York tenement, workers in a New York garment sweatshop, pasta drying in a tenement hallway, a cake and cruller bakeshop in a tenement, a candy factory with an adjoining bedroom, an image of an overcrowded tenement house, a shack where berry pickers lived during the picking season, and cranberry pickers. Some League pamphlets consisted almost exclusively of photographs of workers and their working conditions.⁷³ In contrast with the NCL, co-operators used photographs to document virtuous, co-operative events rather than illuminate the obscure conditions of production.⁷⁴ But co-operatives did circulate images of co-operative productions in their publications. Their descriptions of the co-operative supply chain were published in movement periodicals such as *The Wheatsheaf* and reprinted in local co-operative publications. From bacon to tea, co-operators depicted the virtuous working conditions that attended the production of co-operative goods.⁷⁵ These techniques encouraged consumers to see actual images of workplaces and associate them with specific commodities, thus encouraging ethical purchasing.

The attempt to demystify commodities via the literal senses is exemplified in activists' use of exhibitions. These exhibitions ranged from traveling shows of sweated goods to local meetings where people were able to see, touch, and sometimes taste goods while learning about their origins. Co-operative Reports are rife with instances of co-operative exhibitions.⁷⁶ A member of the Oldham co-operative society described an 1894 exhibition as "an object lesson in co-operation."⁷⁷ This suggested that co-operative exhibitions of goods were a celebration of the ability of the working classes to produce high-quality, non-sweated goods. Participants could take these goods in and appreciate their working-class origins. Members of the Women's Guild developed similar exhibitions of co-operative products for use at conferences throughout England: "Our idea is that the guild shall possess a box of goods which shall be sent round to the various towns where the conferences are held[.]"⁷⁸ It was also common for local Women's Guild conferences to provide samples of co-operative goods while also taking in lectures. Sometimes these events involved "lantern lectures" – lectures accompanied by photographs projected as slides – on the virtues of co-operation.⁷⁹ Explicit information about the content of the slides is difficult to come by, but it is clear that Guild members used these lantern slides to encourage ethical purchasing. Several reports of Women's Guild events identify lantern lectures on "Cocoa", "Soap", "Flour", and a range of other goods.⁸⁰ These events paired photographic images and accounts of working conditions with demonstrations of co-operative goods; there the consumers could perceive the producer and commodity together.

The NCL engaged in analogous exhibitions of just and unjust goods. Exhibitions of labeled garments were such a common strategy that one member of the League wrote that "chronicling them would be a hopeless undertaking."⁸¹ These exhibitions involved displays of goods bearing the NCL label along with photographs of the factories from which these goods originated.⁸² For major expositions such as the 1915 Panama-Pacific in San Francisco, the League used large screens or slides that depicted "unfavorable industrial conditions" and the League's work to remedy those issues, including samples of goods made in tenements (Figure 2).⁸³ In the years from 1914 to 1917, this exhibit visited 28 states. Other exhibits were available by request for smaller local groups. These comprised photographic replicas of the large screens, samples of tenement made goods, and slides of ideal working conditions.⁸⁴ In at least one instance, a

Contrasts to Historical Predecessors

We can identify direct predecessors to activists' sensory techniques in eighteenth and nineteenth century abolitionists. By juxtaposing turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists with their abolitionist predecessors, we can appreciate how activists' commitment to the ethical consumer informed their activism. Although they employed analogous sensory techniques, abolitionists were committed to less universal visions of the ethical consumer. Consequently, they were less likely to use these techniques to advocate ethical purchasing in general. Additionally, abolitionists hoped that ethical purchasing, if it did occur, would occur because people had duties as Christians, especially – not as consumers. Moreover, this contrast underscores an essential analytical point: to avoid falsely attributing the use of sensory techniques to commodity fetishism, one must demonstrate that activists' used these techniques to draw connections between the labor process, the commodity, and the consumer. In so far as modern consumer activists do this, one can argue that they are responding to the fetish of commodities.⁸⁹

The abolitionists in England anticipated turn-of-the-twentieth-century activism in their attempt to establish long-distance solidarity with workers through purchasing.⁹⁰ For example, a 1791 abolitionist pamphlet declared, "every person who habitually consumes one article of West Indian produce is guilty of the crime of murder[.]"⁹¹ British abolitionists identified the consumer as causally and morally responsible for workers' suffering and death. Furthermore, they sometimes sought to reconnect consumers and produces through the use of sensory techniques. Abolitionists' made the rhetorical appeals that demonstrated the physical connection of the consumer of slave-grown sugar to the slaves themselves. The slaves' blood and sweat polluted the sugar that British colonists purchased, both literally and figuratively.⁹² By drawing this connection through striking imagery and appeals to the sympathy of the consumer, abolitionists addressed the practical inability of consumers to sense the labor slave involved in commodity production. But the techniques that British abolitionists employed were not just figurative. They also circulated photographs, paintings, and stylized images emblazoned on goods as a means of identifying with the abolitionist cause.⁹³

But while eighteenth and early nineteenth century British abolitionists developed an understanding of the consumer as powerful and responsible, they did not stress the consumer's universality. In addition, their sensory techniques were not so closely yoked to an obvious ethical duty to purchase non-slave made goods. Many British abolitionists insisted on abstention from the purchase and use of slave-produced sugar and rum. Furthermore, anti-slavery societies often pursued figurative efforts to demystify slave-produced commodities. They used poems and literature to render the images of suffering workers and attach them to specific commodities like rum and sugar. British women's Anti-Slavery Societies stressed reading about slave conditions as a means of encouraging political action.⁹⁴ As such, with the exception of the images of slavery, the sensory techniques used by early abolitionists remained figurative – a probable consequence of technological limitations. Even these images were designed to evoke sympathy with the slave more than to perceive the conditions in which they toiled. With respect to consumers' universality, British abolitionists' moral appeals did not rest on the role of the consumer and the causal connection between consumer and producer. Rather, it referred to other social roles and

identities. If the consumer was universal, it was only implicitly so; the abolitionists were not *consumer* activists.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, American free produce supporters put forth another understanding of consumer universality, power, and responsibility that anticipated turn-of-the-twentieth century activists in some ways. They explicitly identified American slavery as a way to supply consumers with commodities – an explicit acknowledgement of consumer power.⁹⁵ And their generic accounts of the consumer accentuated the universality of the consumer identity, even if these groups did not portray themselves as consumer activists. Furthermore, they employed sensory techniques intended to unite the labor process and commodity from the perspective of the consumer. Free produce advocates opened stores that sold goods untainted by slavery. One free produce advocate lamented the corruption of slave-made goods in less scrupulous stores: “Go to yonder store, and the products of oppression will stare you in the face. Look! And you will see the pro-slavery pictures there exhibited.”⁹⁶ While these stores were not filled with “pro-slavery pictures” in a literal sense, these free produce advocates sought to brand slave-made products by using sensory metaphors. In 1851, abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet stated, “The sugar with which we sweetened our tea, and the rice which we ate, were actually spread with the sweat of slaves, sprinkled with their tears, and fanned by their sighs.”⁹⁷ Abolitionists employed such metaphorical sensory language in an attempt to facilitate an imaginative identification with the slave and to portray their working conditions to the consumers who were responsible for these evils.

But we can draw important distinctions between turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists and mid-nineteenth century abolitionists. First, each of these abolitionist groups saw themselves as abolitionists, not consumer activists.⁹⁸ Lawrence Glickman notes that free produce advocates, Sabbatarians, and Southern nonintercourse advocates “neither defined themselves as consumer activists, nor understood themselves to be fighting on behalf of consumers.”⁹⁹ This demonstrates that their understanding of the consumer as an actor was more limited than later activists. Second, abolitionist groups focused exclusively on physically remote slaves, while later activists included a substantial number of domestic but invisible workers. This suggests that the problems abolitionists’ addressed were not intrinsic to capitalism. Furthermore, later activists addressed a wider range of labor practices, from tenement labor and sweatshops to forced overtime and employment of children. Third, predecessors’ sensory techniques were predominantly figurative. While they circulated visual portrayals of slave conditions, abolitionists fixed on the imagination as a means of securing ethical purchasing and were less concerned (and able) to depict images of working conditions.

Conclusion

Overall, we can explain turn-of-the-twentieth century activists’ reliance on sensory techniques by casting them as a response to the practical dimension of commodity fetishism. In a world where the anonymity of mass-produced commodities challenged the trustworthiness of consumers’ senses, activists’ employed sensory techniques to recover them. Further, these techniques revealed an assumption that enhanced “seeing” would motivate righteous consumption – the ethical power of the senses. It is easy to see why consumer activists’ relied on these techniques and made these assumptions. The history of consumer activism tells us that many different

groups have sought to illuminate the provenance of anonymous commodities. By introducing commodity fetishism, I help explain one form of appeal that consumer activists commonly employ. This approach provides the basis for a historically-grounded sociological account of the dynamics of consumer activism.

To offer such an account, we can draw on commodity fetishism, sensory techniques, and the ethical power of the senses. Sensory techniques and the ethical power of the senses provide a benchmark for periodizing and comparing consumer activism. By examining consumer activists' techniques, I have shown that we can identify crucial similarities and differences between abolitionists and turn-of-the-twentieth century activists. Both employed sensory techniques that illuminated the connections between the labor process, commodities, and consumers. In addition, these techniques assumed the ethical power of the senses to compel righteous consumption. Yet by contrasting these techniques with those of abolitionists, I also called attention to their distinctive visions of the consumer, from the limited vision of the abolitionists to the broad vision of turn-of-the-twentieth century activists. Thus, we use these concepts as benchmarks for comparing consumer activism across time. Moreover, these concepts encourage us to place consumer activism in a transnational framework. As such, it allows us to develop a broader analysis of consumer activism that looks beyond and across national borders.¹⁰⁰

Scholars have made much of the transition away from labor-oriented (and “political”) consumer activism that occurred over the course of the twentieth-century.¹⁰¹ Turning away from robust accounts of consumer-citizenship and social duties, they show that many consumer activists have turned toward issues such as consumer safety and value for money. It would be worthwhile to examine whether analogous sensory techniques for reconstructing consumers' perceptions persisted in consumer protection campaigns, green consumerism, the Fair Trade movement, and buy local campaigns throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first century. Furthermore, with the advent of information technologies, the sights and sounds of the labor process have become more directly transmittable; they can even be encoded on product packaging itself. Presently, there are apps for smart phones such as ShopEthical that allow consumers to call up information about the labor process and companies that sponsor such goods.¹⁰² At the same time, commodity chains have become ever more complex. Cross-temporal comparisons will allow us to find whether consumer activists' use of sensory techniques vary with the size of the commodity chain. Moreover, by comparing activists' sensory techniques, we can clarify the significance of technology in their development and use. Attention to how and where such sensory techniques persist would illuminate significant continuities and discontinuities in consumer activism over time and across regions.

Commodity fetishism can help explain the dynamics of consumer activism, but it is of less help in explaining particular instances where non-consumer based activists employ similar techniques – especially in other forms of humanitarian “long-distance advocacy”.¹⁰³ For instance, British missionaries John and Alice Harris, contemporaries of these consumer activists, employed lantern lectures to motivate the British public to address the atrocities in King Leopold's Congo Free State.¹⁰⁴ The lectures were accompanied by horrific images designed to captivate the audience. In the case of the Congo Reform campaign, it would be overreaching to claim that commodity fetishism had any direct relevance to their use of lantern lectures. While the Congo Reform campaign sought to induce the British public to care about the Congo in spite of their

distance, consumer activists sought to collapse the distance between consumers and workers via the commodity form. This raises two relevant questions for future comparative research. Do consumer activists' sensory techniques have analogues in other non-consumer based activism? And are some sensory techniques more effective at inducing action than others? We might find that the style of sensory techniques varies if the problem to be solved relates to commodity fetishism as opposed to the problem of physical distance or ignorance. To answer such questions would require one to analyze the content of the images and their reception, not just their use as a technique for long-distance advocacy.¹⁰⁵

Ultimately, activists' attempts to unmask the fetish of commodities may reinforce it. By seeking to connect the commodity to the social relations of production through the consumer's perspective, they re-establish the commodity as the consumer's means of relating to the labor process and laborers. It was this very situation, where people relate to one another by means of a commodity, that Marx dramatized in his discussion of commodity fetishism. Thus, activists' reliance on sensory techniques may help explain the limits of ethical purchasing schemes more precisely. The limits may not only stem from activists' focus on consumers as agents of social change, but from an overreliance on sensory techniques for inducing ethical purchasing.¹⁰⁶ Even so, consumer activists' sought to reshape the meaning of consumption. They did so using techniques that expressed a sincere attempt to render the conditions of labor sensible to the purchaser of commodities. As such, my approach reveals the versatility of commodity fetishism as a phenomenological and historically-developing description of life in capitalist societies. We can draw upon it not to denounce the illusions of consumer activists, but to understand the form that such projects take as well as their significance.

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

² Ibid.; see also, Haskell, Thomas, "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part 1", *American Historical Review*, Vol. 90, No. 2, (1985), pp. 339–361

³ Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); See also, work on the social functions and significance of consumption such as Douglas, Mary and Isherwood, Baron, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*, (New York: Routledge, 1979)

⁴ Consumer activism is frequently identified as a pursuit of the leisured classes and with good reason. See Litter, Jo, "What's Wrong with Ethical Consumption", *Ethical Consumption: A Critical Introduction*, Tanis Lewis and Emily Potter, eds. (New York: Routledge Press, 2011), pp. 27–39; Adams, Matthew and Raisborough, Jayne, "What Can Sociology Say About Fair Trade: Class, Reflexivity, and Ethical Consumption", *Sociology*, Vol. 42 No. 6, (2008), pp. 1165–1182

⁵ Campbell, Colin, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1987); Graeber, David, "Consumption", *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 52, No. 4, (2011), pp. 489–511

⁶ Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic*, pp. 77–95

⁷ Miller, Daniel, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1987); Warde, Alan, "Consumption and Theories of Practice", *Journal of Consumer Culture*, Vol. 5, No. 2, (2005), pp. 131–153; Hennoin, Antoine, "Those Things That Hold Us Together: Taste and Sociology", *Cultural Sociology*, Vol. 1 (1), (2007) pp. 97–114; Dietler, Michael, "Consumption", *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies*, Dan Hicks and Mary C. Beaudry, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010);

⁸ On the tendency in material culture studies of consumption to remain "local", see Woodward, Ian, "Consumption as Cultural Interpretation: Taste, Performativity, and Navigating the Forest of Objects", *The Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, Jeffrey Alexander, Ronald Jacobs, and Philip Smith, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 671–697; for an example, see Coles, Benjamin and Crang, Philip, "Placing Alternative Consumption: commodity fetishism in Borough Fine Foods Market, London" in *Ethical Consumption*, Tania Lewis and Emily Potter, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 87–102

⁹ Marx, Karl, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans Ben Fowkes, (New York: Vintage, 1977), p. 165.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 169

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 165

¹² *Ibid.* pp. 165, 166, 167, 169

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

¹⁴ Throughout the section, Marx refers to the appearance of the commodity in contrast with the subtleties that arise through its analysis. The "appearance" Marx refers to occurs by and through the exchange of goods. Take, for instance, his discussion of how useful objects become commodities: "Since the producers do not come into social contact until they exchange the products of their labour, the specific social characteristics of their private labours appear only within this exchange." p. 165

¹⁵ On the rise of "long-distance advocacy" since the sixteenth century, see Stamatov, Peter, *The Origins of Global Humanitarianism: Religion, Empires, and Advocacy*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013). On eighteenth and nineteenth-century forms of collective concern about the origins of goods, see Breen, T.H., *Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Sussman, Charlotte, "Women and the Politics of Sugar, 1792", *Representations*, No. 48, (Autumn 1994), pp. 48–69; Glickman, *Buying Power*

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 169

¹⁷ See Miller, , *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, p. 204; Woodward, "Consumption as Cultural Interpretation", p. 685; Zukin, Sharon, *Point of Purchase: How Shopping Changed American Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 254; Torrance, John, *Karl Marx's Theory of Ideas*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 112–120

¹⁸ Marx, *ibid.* p. 166

¹⁹ Miller, Daniel, "Consumption as the Vanguard of History: A Polemic By Way of an Introduction", *Acknowledging Consumption: A Review of New Studies*, Daniel Miller, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 28; Woodward, "Consumption as Cultural Interpretation", p. 685; Torrance, , *Karl Marx*, pp. 119–120

²⁰ I see no reason to follow Torrance in using the language of delusion to describe commodity fetishism in general. Torrance conflates the practical or phenomenal experience of commodity fetishism with the intellectual errors it occasions. If commodity fetishism is delusional, it is a delusion with a practical basis in the social organization of production, circulation, and exchange in capitalist societies. Thus, it has a certain phenomenal or apparent truth. To call it a delusion requires an analytical perspective on the dynamics of capitalist production, which is precisely what Marx articulates in *Capital*. If anything, bourgeois economists are in the thrall of such delusions. As consumers, Marx himself, bourgeois economists, laborers, and everyone else would be subject to the same practical "delusion."

²¹ Sutherland argues that Marx's use of "Gallerte" as a noun, which has been rendered "congealed" in English, plays on the meaning of a specific commodity – a gelatinous substance used in jams, jellies, and the like, which consists of boiled animal tissue, bones, fat, and muscle. As such, Marx's decision to render the human labor that lies behind the commodity form as "Gallerte" satirizes bourgeois consumers as cannibals. Sutherland, Luke, "Marx in Jargon", world picture 1, (Spring 2008), pp. 6–11.

²² For a sample, see Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic*; Gabriel, Yiannis and Lang, Tim, *The Unmanageable Consumer*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Press, 2006); Miller, Daniel, *Consumption and its Consequences*, (New York: Polity Press, 2012)

²³ In this sense, commodity fetishism establishes a practical limit or bound to the meaning of consumption, but it does not select or force people to accept such a meaning. On limiting and selecting causes, see Wright, Erik, Levine,

Andrew, and Sober, Elliot, *Reconstructing Marxism: Essays on Explanation and the Theory of History*, (New York: Verso, 1992), pp. 147– 150

²⁴ In addition to consumer experience, commodity fetishism relates to the abstract character of capitalist societies, wherein commodities are valuable for the purposes of exchange. This dual nature of commodity fetishism reflects Marx's distinction between use-value and exchange-value. As such, we would expect activists' to employ imagistic sensory techniques to address the former and abstract, intellectual strategies to address the latter (e.g. statistical data about labor, wages, the workforce, etc.). This is in fact what many activists do. I focus on sensory techniques in this paper to illuminate the first half of the problem. But the reader must bear in mind that commodity fetishism comprises both concrete and abstract aspects. I would like to examine this more complicated dynamic in future research. On the broader implications of commodity fetishism, see Torrance, , *Karl Marx's Theory of Ideas*, pp. 112– 120, 165; for a clear account of real abstractions in capitalist societies, see Sewell, W.H., "The Temporalities of Capitalism", *Socio-Economic Review*, Vol. 8, No. 6, (2008), pp. 513– 537, esp. 524-527

²⁵ For analogous discussions, see Glickman, , *Buying Power*, pp. 7– 13; Lewis, Tania and Potter, Emily, *Ethical Consumption: A Critical Introduction*, pp. 7– 8; Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser, eds. *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times*, (New York: NYU Press, 2012), pp. 5– 8

²⁶ Emily S. Rosenberg, ed. *A World Connecting: 1870-1945*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press); Livingston, James, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Glickman, Lawrence, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Rappaport, Erika, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

²⁷ Maddison, Angus, *Contours of the World Economy 1-2030 AD: Essays in Macro-Economic History*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 264

²⁸ Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*, pp. 142– 177; Porter Benson, Susan, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Shapiro Sanders, Lise, *Consuming Fantasies: Labor, Leisure, and the London Shop Girl, 1880-1920*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press).

²⁹ This is especially true of research that address the period prior to World War II. For example, Trentmann, Frank, *Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption, and Civil Society in Modern Britain*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Hilton, Matthew, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Glickman, , *Buying Power*. Also, these activists' can be usefully understood as part of the transatlantic discourse of progressivism, focused as they were on addressing similar social questions of wealth concentration, mass production, and urbanization. See Rodgers, Daniel, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age*, (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

³⁰ *NCL Annual Report, 1900-01*

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

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

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

³⁴ Webb, Beatrice, *The Co-operative Movement in Great Britain*, (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1930 [1891]); Pollard, Sidney, *Essays in Labour History*, ed. Asa Briggs and John Saville, (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1971).

³⁵ Gurney, Peter, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption, 1870-1930*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996) pp. 29– 57

³⁶ Redfern, Percy, *The Story of the C.W.S. 1863-1913*, (Manchester: The CWS, 1913), p. 291

³⁷ Payne, P.L., "The Emergence of the Large-Scale Company in Britain, 1870-1914", *Economic History Review*, No. 3, 1967, pp. 519– 542; Gurney, *Co-operative Culture*, pp. 19– 20.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 19

³⁹ "The Co-operative Store: Paper I. Committees, Members, & Employees." M.C. Spooner. n.d. *Women's Co-operative Guild*. p. 3 [italics in original]

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- ⁴⁰ It is also worth mentioning the implicit limits of the League's universalism. Only "civilized" communities were included, which restricted the aims of these groups to consumers in industrializing regions. "Aims and Principles of the Consumers' League," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Nov., 1899), pp. 289–304
- ⁴¹ "The Cost of Cheapness", *Co-operative News*, 04/08/1905, p. 410; "Plain Talk", *Co-operative News*, Woman's Corner, 07/07/1906, p. 814; "The Responsibility of the Consumer", *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 32, Supplement 22. Child Labor and Social Progress. Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Meeting of the National Child Labor Committee (Jul., 1908), pp. 108–112
- ⁴² "Constitution", National Consumers' League, 1899.
- ⁴³ "The Consumer", Rosalind Nash, *The Co-operative News*, Woman's Corner, 01/1/1890;
- ⁴⁴ "The Woman with the Basket", *Co-operative News*, Woman's Corner, 01/02/1909, pp. 22–23
- ⁴⁵ "Constitution", National Consumers' League, 1899.
- ⁴⁶ "How to Increase Loyalty", Woman's Corner, *The Co-operative News*, 10/02/1909, p. 1281; see also, "A Homely Chat to Homely Folk on Co-operators and Co-operating", *The Manchester and Salford Co-operative Herald*, Vol. XX, pp. 242–251
- ⁴⁷ "Sweating", Thomas McKinney, *The Co-operative News*, 08/27/1892.
- ⁴⁸ At a 1902 meeting of the Executive Committee, one member reported happily that, "the Trades Union in general show a friendly spirit toward us." See "Report on the Executive Committee Meeting", *National Consumers' League Archives*, Reel 16, Slide 35. But the NCL remained nonpartisan in their public presentation. Unless one could marshal incontrovertible evidence of antipathy by businesses, e.g. refusal to bargain with workers, the League insisted on remaining neutral.
- ⁴⁹ The League had members and sympathizers across the spectrum of labor reformers. Florence Kelley, the League's leader, was a committed socialist. Josephine Shaw Lowell, a founder of the first Consumers' League in New York City, was involved with the paternalistic Charity Organization Society. On the former, see Sklar, Kathryn Kish, *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work: The Rise of Women's Political Culture, 1830-1900*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). On the latter, see Huyssen, David, *Progressive Inequality: Rich and Poor in New York, 1890-1920*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), pp. 63–88.
- ⁵⁰ For an overview, see Robertson, Nicole, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain, 1914-1960* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishers, 2010).
- ⁵¹ The 27th Annual Report of the Women's Co-operative Guild, May 1909-1910, pp. 1–2.
- ⁵² On advertising during this period, see Strasser, Susan, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989); Richards, Thomas, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Rappaport, Erika, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 142–177; McGovern, Charles, *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Leach, William, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*, (New York: Random House, 1993)
- ⁵³ On the issue of visual metaphors, especially see Woodiwiss, Anthony, *The Visual in Social Theory*, (London: The Athlone Press, 2001); Jay, Martin, *Downcast Eyes: the Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993); Hal Foster, ed. *Vision and Visuality*, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988)
- ⁵⁴ *NCL Annual Report, 1900-01.*, p. 14, italics in original
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14, italics added for emphasis
- ⁵⁶ *The Story of the C.W.S. 1863-1913*, p. 291.
- ⁵⁷ Katy, "Shopping" in *Co-operative News*, 06/11/1892, pp. 638–9. This essay, as well as another, shared the first prize in a Women's Guild competition to discuss the significance and practice of shopping. Both essays made explicit reference to the conditions under which goods were produced.
- ⁵⁸ "Forward by the President", *The Work of the Consumers' League of the City of New York*, 1915. p. 6
- ⁵⁹ "The Poor Consumer", Editorial in *The Co-operative News*, 11/17/1906, p. 1354
- ⁶⁰ "Aims and Principles of Consumers' Leagues", Kelley, Florence. *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 5, No. III, Nov. 1899.
- ⁶¹ "The Responsibilities of Consumers", Kelley, Florence. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 32, Supplement 22. Child Labor and Social Progress. Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Meeting of the National Child Labor Committee. p. 109
- ⁶² "Report of the Secretary", *NCL Annual Report 1914-1917*, pp. 20–21
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 21
- ⁶⁴ "Time and Trade: Should Co-operative Societies Advertise?", R., *Co-operative News*, 09/04/1909, p. 1137

⁶⁵ “Report of the Secretary”, *NCL Annual Report*, 1900-1901, p. 12

⁶⁶ *Second Annual Report 1900-1901*, inside front cover.

⁶⁷ “Committee on Label”, *The Work of the Consumers’ League of the City of New York*, 1915, pp. 35–36

⁶⁸ However, local wholesale societies were not required to stock goods exclusively produced in co-operative industries for co-operative stores. But reports of labeling issues analogous to the kind experienced by the Consumers’ Leagues are scant. As I discuss below, co-operators were deeply concerned with mislabeled goods.

⁶⁹ This text comes from a 1916 advertisement for co-operative clothing but was standard in co-operative ads, see *Co-operative News*, 1/22/1916, p. X. Advertisements for Co-operative products appeared in many Co-operative publications, whether the *Co-operative News*, local monthly papers published by individual co-operative societies, and co-operative journals such as the *Wheat sheaf*.

⁷⁰ The article spanned two issues of *The Manchester and Salford Monthly*: October 1908, Vol. XX, No. 239, pp. 206–210; November 1908, Vol. XX, No. 241, p. 228

⁷¹ “The Taint of the Sweater”, Ed. *Co-operative News*, 05/26/06, p. 583.

⁷² *The NCL Annual Report*, 1905-06, pp. 4, 13, 24, 28, 36, 38, 40, 44, 45, 48, 49

⁷³ *Children Who Work in the Tenements*, The Consumers’ League of the City of New York, March 1908; “Appendix VII”, *What the United States Government says about Child Labor in Tenements*, New York Child Labor Committee, March 1911

⁷⁴ See, *The Manchester and Salford Monthly Herald*, October 1900, Vol. XII, No. 143.

⁷⁵ “A ‘Corner’ in Biscuits”, *Manchester and Salford Monthly Herald*, March 1908, Vol. XX, p. 47; “Bacon”, *Manchester and Salford Monthly Herald*, May 1910, Vol. XXII, No. 257, p. 93; “C.W.S. Drug Works”, *Manchester and Salford Monthly Herald*, Vol. XXII, No. 261, pp. 170–173.

⁷⁶ For instance, “On the Trail of the Sweater” described a conference with displays of sweating conditions in the chocolate, confectionary, trade biscuits, jellies, and pickle-making trades. “On the Trail of the Sweater”, *Co-operative News*, 03/14/1914; on the significance of exhibitions to the Co-operative movement, see Gurney, *Co-operative Culture*, pp. 79–80

⁷⁷ Cited in Gurney, , *Co-operative Culture*, p. 80

⁷⁸ “The Annual Report of the WCG”, *Co-operative News*, 5/23/1891, p. 518

⁷⁹ I return to the issue of lantern lectures briefly in the conclusion. On lantern lectures and turn of the twentieth century humanitarianism, see Grant, Kevin, *A Civilised Savagery: Britain and New Slavery in Africa, 1884-1926*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 39–78.

⁸⁰ “Co-operative Production”, *Twenty-Seventh Annual Report of the Women’s Co-operative Guild*, May 1909-1910, pp. 12–13; “Bristol Society: Report of the Women’s Guild”, *Annual Co-operative Congress, 1906*, pp. 159–160; *Sixteenth Annual Report of the Co-operative Women’s Guild, April 1898-1899*, p. 5

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

⁸² “Exhibits of Labeled Goods”, *NCL Annual Report 1901-02*, pp. 21–22

⁸³ “Report of the Committee on Exhibits”, *NCL Annual Report 1914-1917*, p. 46

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46

⁸⁵ “A Factory Entertains a League”, *NCL Annual Report 1902-03*, pp. 15–16.

⁸⁶ “Exhibitions”, *NCL Annual Report, 1906-07*, pp. 17–18

⁸⁷ “Sub-Committee on Exhibits”, *The Consumers’ League of the City of New York*, 1914, p. 26

⁸⁸ “Committee on Label”, *The Work of the Consumers’ League of the City of New York 1915*, p. 37.

⁸⁹ While I focus on sensory techniques in this paper, activists did not employ sensory techniques alone. They often collected and published abstract statistical information about various trades, from average wages and hours worked to workplace injuries and more. These contributed to their attempts to demystify commodities as well. But owing to space constraints, I could not do justice to the relationship between sensory and abstract techniques in this article. I hope to address this issue in subsequent work.

⁹⁰ A more thorough comparison must address the relationship between chattel slavery and capitalism, but such questions are beyond the scope of this article. While it is clear that chattel slavery contradicts a basic principle of capitalist societies – free labor – historians acknowledge that slave labor was essential to the development of capitalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially. The literature on abolitionists is vast and diffuse. For some notable works, see Davis, David Brion, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966); Drescher, Seymour, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Anti-Slavery*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Hochschild, Adam, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire’s Slaves*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005); Mintz, Sidney, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), pp. 19–73

⁹¹ Cited in Sussman, Charlotte, *Consuming Anxieties: Consumer Protest, Gender, and British Slavery, 1713-1833*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 43

⁹² Sussman, "Women and the Politics of Sugar, 1792", pp. 51– 58

⁹³ For an account of the visual iconography of the anti-slavery movement, see Kurasawa, Fuyuki, "The Long Shadow of History: The Paradoxes of Iconographic Reiteration in Anti-Slavery Advocacy", *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, Vol. 2, 1 (2014); on the circulation of the abolitionist "brand" among the English middle classes, see Stamatov, *The Origins of Global Humanitarianism*, pp. 159– 160

⁹⁴ Sussman, *Consuming Anxieties*, pp. 130– 147

⁹⁵ In this paragraph, I draw on Glickman, Lawrence, *Buying Power*, pp. 61– 89; Glickman is the only contemporary historian to address these American abolitionists as consumer activists; Glickman, pp. 73– 76

⁹⁶ Cited in Glickman, *Buying Power* p. 79

⁹⁷ Cited in *ibid.*, p. 79

⁹⁸ On the evangelical character of this activism, see Abzug, Robert, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Young, Michael, *Bearing Witness Against Sin: The Evangelical Birth of the American Social Movement*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Christine Bolt and Seymour Drescher, eds. *Anti-Slavery, Religion, and Reform*, (Hamden, CT: Archon Press, 1980).

⁹⁹ Glickman, *Buying Power*, p. 63

¹⁰⁰ Cross, Gary. "Research on the History of Consumption in the United States: An Overview" in *Decoding Modern Consumer Societies*. Hartmut Berghoff and Uwe Spiekermann, eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 46

¹⁰¹ Hilton, Matthew, *Consumerism in Twentieth Century Britain*; Cohen, Lizabeth, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Twentieth-Century America*, (New York: Vintage, 2004).

¹⁰² Anthropologist Miller, Daniel signals the sensory potential of information technologies in a proposal for consumer education that uses streaming video to follow the production, circulation, exchange, and use of specific commodities. See *Consumption and its Consequences*, (New York: Polity, 2012), pp. 139– 142

¹⁰³ I find other activists a more fitting comparative group than marketers because the former seek to remedy collective action problems. On the origins of "long-distance advocacy", see Stamatov, Peter, *The Origins of Global Humanitarianism*, pp. 1– 23.

¹⁰⁴ Grant, *A Civilised Savagery*, pp. 39– 78

¹⁰⁵ See Fuyuki Kurasawa, "The Long Shadow of History..." for an analysis of the shared iconography of anti-slavery movements in the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries.

¹⁰⁶ Robins, Jonathan, "Slave Cocoa and Red Rubber: E.D. Morel and the Problem of Ethical Consumption." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 54(2012); for broader denunciations, see Žižek, Slavoj, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, (New York: Verso, 2009), pp. 52– 55; Bauman, Zygmunt, *Does Ethics Have a Chance in an Age of Consumers?*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 109– 193