

**New Media and the Politics of Consumer Activism –
Opportunities and Challenges of Euro-Asian Anti-Corporate Campaigns
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Abstract

The question of ‘new directions in cultural politics’ is addressed by looking at current changes in two core areas of cultural politics research: changes in the realm of social movements and changes in the realm of popular culture and mediated political communication. It is argued that these changes are interrelated in two respects: Firstly, there is the interrelation between changes in media technology and media cultures, and changes in protest issues and cultures. Secondly, there is a strong interrelation between old and new elements in media use, cultural expressions and political aims of new political protest actors. The changes in political protest action will be exemplified by discussing the rise of political consumerism, particularly Euro-Asian consumer campaigns that draw their power of mobilisation not only from the impact of modernisation processes of Western life styles but also from the new opportunity structures that are offered in the “net society”. Based on a functionalist definition of transnational consumerism campaigns, the paper draws some conclusions concerning necessary future research with regard to the new opportunities and challenges of forming a transnational public sphere and mobilising for a global citizenship.

Old and new directions in cultural politics

Social movements and political protest have always been key topics of cultural politics research. This is mainly due to its non-institutionalist approach to political processes and its particular focus on the subjective dimension of politics. Cultural politics represents an innovative approach to the analysis of power-related social conflicts and as such it can be interpreted from the point of view of a sociology of knowledge as a side effect and as a reflection of major changes in the dynamic and character of social conflicts in late-modern societies, most significantly the change from old to new social movements. Part of this change has been the rise of identity politics addressing postmaterialist issues, like the recognition of differences based on gender, ethnicity, religion, race, sexuality or age.

Apart from the focus placed on identity politics by new social movements, the academic interest in the cultural dimension of political processes has also grown because of the increasing importance of mass media in generating political legitimacy. While traditional political communication studies have primarily looked at the impact of mediatisation of political communication in terms of an instrumentalistic understanding of communication (who says what to whom using which channel and to what effect), research in cultural politics has highlighted the expressive and aesthetic dimension of communication in media-related politics: the symbolic construction of political images, the dramatisation of political conflicts or the ritualisation of collective political action. As popular culture has become a crucial cultural resource for the political mobilisation of parties and movements, analysing the relation between politics and popular culture has become one of the overarching topics that links the research on the cultural politics of mainstream political actors with the above-mentioned research on cultural politics as identity politics of new social movement actors. The question of ‘*new directions* in cultural politics’ can only be answered by looking at current changes in both core areas of cultural politics mentioned: on the one hand changes in the realm of social movements, and on the other hand changes in the realm of popular culture and mediated political communication. In the following I will argue that these changes are interrelated in two respects: Firstly, there is the interrelation between changes in media technology and media cultures, and changes in protest issues and cultures. Secondly, there is a strong interrelation between old and new elements in media use, collective action repertoires and the political aims of new transnational political protest actors. Changes in political protest action will be exemplified by discussing the rise in transnational consumer activism, particularly Euro-Asian consumer campaigns that draw their power of mobilisation not only from the impact of modernisation processes of Western life styles but also from new opportunity structures that are offered in the “net society” (Castells).

New media and political protest – old wine in new bottles?

Since the emergence of the global social justice movement, scholars have paid particular attention to the interdependency between technological developments and changes in protest movements, and their use of different communication media. Meanwhile, there is a plethora of contributions that emphasise the multiple influences of new media technologies on social movement organisations (SMOs) – or in a broader sense civil society organisations (CSOs)

(Street/Scott 2001; Naughton 2001; Diani 2001; Donk 2003; Bennett 2004; Ford/Gil 2001; Uggla 2004; Pickerill 2004).

Taking the development from the 1960s to the present, we can roughly distinguish three different media strategies employed by social movement actors (Rucht 2004; Baringhorst 2005b):

1. The mobilisation of a counter-public as an expression of a general resistance to the hegemonic power of mass media.
2. The adaptation to the logic of commercialised audio-visual media. This adaptation was already inherent in student and anti-war movements of the late 1960s. However, it has become much more prominent and widely spread in the 1980s and early 1990s (Baringhorst 1998).
3. A new phase in the development of the interrelation between protest movements and media change has started with the introduction and spread of digital ICT (Information and Communication Technology) in the 1990s. E-mail offers cheap and fast correspondence facilities combined with the possibility of sending multiple messages simultaneously. Listserves provide interactive communication modes that encourage broader grassroots participation in discussions on issues of protest coordination and other issues. The retrieval, research and general dissemination of relevant information was significantly improved by the World Wide Web (WWW) and by particular movement related networks like PeaceNet, EcoNet and others (Ford/Gil 2001: 212-217). New ICT contributed to a general growth in the number of formal and informal groupings of civil society actors, the formation of broad decentralised coalitions and networks, as well as to the circulation of a huge amount of information among those actors. They support the empowerment of CSOs not only through improved means of personal communication, and information storage and dissemination, but also because capacities of governmental actors to control the digital flow of information and communication are significantly reduced compared to audio-visual mass media. As the success of protest actors is largely dependent on mobilising public support for their issues, creating successful communicative links between counter-public and public sphere is a vital element of their media-related strategies.

J. Street and A. Scott have argued that anti-capitalist activism carried out by the critical movement against globalisation has benefited from new media technologies by increased organisational flexibilities, resource advantages and the facilitating of a 'common frame of

meaning'. However, in terms of political aims they state that the new movements show little innovation and are merely rearticulating the old master frame of anti-imperialism in a new guise. 'The major difference is that "neo-liberalism" now stands where "imperialism" once stood as the core characteristic of the system against or around which the master frame defines itself. In other words, those movements which we are keen to describe as 'new' in the *modus vivendi* appear to be a revival of older campaigns with respect to their frames of meaning – or, if you prefer, ideology'.(Street/Scott 2001: 47).

With regard to the interpretation of framing strategies, organisational structure and consumer mobilisation of Anti-Corporate Campaigns, I would agree with Street and Scott that new communication technologies have facilitated and extended communication flows and resource mobilization of protest networks. However, although there are old ideological elements in the new movements' frames of meaning, there are significant differences to the old class-based, anti-capitalism movements of the past. The most significant one is the shift of focus away from the sphere of production as the prime sphere of mobilisation to the sphere of distribution and consumption, so allowing the anti-corporate movement appear to be closer to humanitarian early socialist ideas than to Marxist theories of socialism. Contrary to both the old labour movement and new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, current political consumerism in Europe is neither simply anti-capitalistic or anti-consumerist, nor simply based on working-class or middle-class actors. Its master frame is neither solely materialistic in the sense of Marxist or anti-imperialistic ideologies, nor solely postmaterialistic in the sense of Ronald Inglehardt. It is rather a new synthesis of both: a reframing of working-class issues like workers' rights – fair pay, humane working conditions and the right to collectively organise – in a global dimension linked in with middle-class 'lifestyle politics' (Bennett) of ethical consumption. Agents of change are a broad coalition of diverse working-class and middle-class based civil society organisations (CSO): most of all trade unions, church groups, North- and South-NGOs. Despite their different social and ideological backgrounds they all address a new prime mover of social and political change: the citizen as ethical consumer.

Changes of system and lifeworld – explaining the rise of political consumerism

In their discussion of the blind spots of social movement paradigms, like the "political-process-model" developed by Tilly, Tarrow and others based on theories of rational action and the identity model that interprets protest action as "dramaturgical action" aimed at getting one's subjectivity and identity recognised, Cohen and Arato plead for an understanding of

new social movements that combines elements of both approaches. Following Habermasian interaction theory, they propose a 'dualistic conception of society' (Cohen/Arato 1990: 531) along the distinction between system and lifeworld. While their aim is to conceptualise a frame that is able to analyse the strategically rational dimension as well as the expressive and aesthetic dimension of collective action in general, in the following the system/lifeworld distinction is taken as an analytical frame to characterise the particular historical background of the rise of the current transnational political consumerism movement.

Ulrich Beck has commented on the structural and systemic changes that have led to new forms of counter-action when commenting on the strike action by German Opel workers last autumn:

'Am „Streik“ der Opel-Arbeiter kann man gleichsam am lebenden Körper eine der wichtigsten Veränderungen in der Geschichte der Macht beobachten. Es ist die genaue Umkehrung des Kalküls der klassischen Macht- und Herrschaftstheorie, wie sie in den Schriften Max Webers nieder geschrieben steht – und diese Umkehrung ist es, die die Machtmaximierung transnationaler Unternehmen ermöglicht: Das Zwangsmittel ist nicht der drohende Einmarsch, sondern der drohende Nicht-Einmarsch der Investoren oder ihr drohender Ausmarsch. Es gibt nur eines, das schlimmer ist, als von Multis überrollt zu werden: nicht von den Multis überrollt zu werden' (Beck 2004: 8).

Power in the traditional sense of Max Weber is understood as the chance to force one's will upon others. The new power of global economic players, however, is not based on violence as the ultima ratio like the state power. It is much more mobile than state power and globally deployable. The threatening potential of transnational corporations comes down to a single option, that is the option to say no, not to invest and not to be held publicly accountable for entrepreneurial decisions.

Beck discusses the rise of this new and politically unlimited power of corporate actors against the general background of a shift from first to second modernity. While in first modernity the conflict between capital and labour has shaped a national and a clearly defined territorial unity, this national axiomatic has ceased to exist in second modernity. The current epoch is characterised by an overlap of first and second modernity or, to put it in a term by Michael Zürn, a gap between the denationalisation of economics and the denationalisation of politics. In the past, citizens and consumers have usually been conceptualised as binary codes: while the first is perceived to be outward-looking and embracing public interest, the latter is understood as meaning self-interested, inward-looking and private. At the beginning of the 21st century, the citizen consumer, however, has become a key figure in international markets.

Margaret Scammel even speaks of a 'new age of citizen consumers'. Consumers use their purchasing power as a kind of vote and thus are capable of successfully scandalising corporate giants like Shell, Nike or Monsanto in collective action. Successes in raising social awareness of citizen consumers can be seen in the increase in entrepreneurial codes of conduct, socially responsible investment, as well as a positive trend in the sale of fair trade goods, organic and free range, as well as non-animal-tested products. Corporate citizenship and corporate social responsibility, good governance and socially responsible investment have become key terms in the discursive responses of big businesses to the growing moral expectations of consumers and shareholders expressed by NGO-led campaigns (see the publications of the European Corporate Social Responsibility Network of 65 company members like Levi's, IBM, BASF, SONY, McDonald's and 18 national partner organisations www.csreurope.org). Although, as we will discuss later, much of the response of private business can be labelled as symbolic politics, we should not underestimate the impact of consumer activism on corporate politics. As Margaret Scammel has pointed out: 'Consumer activism has forced a powerful political agenda on the public stage to which business has been compelled to react, with a speed and innovation that makes politics seem sluggish' (Scammel 2003: 20). Even if considered to be marginal changes in consumer behaviour, they are nevertheless significant 'because it takes only small changes in consumer behaviour to make substantial impact on company profits' (McIntosh et. al. cit. in Scammel 2003: 10).

According to Beck, the structural change of economic power has made political consumerism the only counter-power left to confront global capitalism. Consumer power is like capitalist power based on a single negative power resource. In the case of consumer power it is the option not to buy, not to buy a scandalised product or all products from a scandalised company or scandalised country or all products of a scandalised mode of production. Shopping power and consumer choice can be mobilized to become a global citizenship action, organised and communicated by civil society organisations, and it can be converted into ballot votes affecting the politics of companies, independent of the boundaries of state territories. The crucial power resource of political consumerism lies in the fact that companies are usually powerless when confronted with consumer boycotts or other collective actions by consumer citizens, because even the most powerful transnational companies cannot dismiss their consumers like they can dismiss workers; they can leave particular places of production but they cannot withdraw from a globalised market (Beck 2004 and 2002).

The structural changes in the economic and political systems are accompanied by changes in the lifeworld of Western consumers that support the systemic necessity of a new direction of

cultural politics as consumer politics. Individualisation and changes in collective identity formation shape the social background of the augmented social and cultural importance of all matters of consumption, giving particular importance to brand names and the symbolic construction of lifestyles in commercial marketing. As Lance W. Bennett has pointed out, ‘the ease of identifying with distant and diverse partners in problem definition, solution, and cosmopolitan community is the engine that drives the process of individualization into new collective forms’ (2003: 22) and enables the mobilisation of global activist networks incorporating diverse identities of activists and very heterogeneous issues framed less in ideological terms than in the broad discourse of risk, threat and justice.

While ideological discourses have lost much of their former influence over identity formation in western societies, lifestyle has become a highly significant element of individual and collective identity construction. Ideological politics has been to a large extent transformed to ‘lifestyle politics’ (Bennett), attaching political meaning to cultural scenes and milieus we live in, the dress code we choose, the music we listen to, or in general, the goods we consume. The images of goods, most markedly expressed in powerful images of global icons of consumer brands, have become decisive elements of identity building, most of all in affluent western societies. Dickinson and Svensen have convincingly highlighted in their book on ‘Beautiful Corporations’ (2000) that, given the condition that most people have what they need and much of what they want, companies can no longer rely on increasing volumes and cutting prices. Issues of beauty become more and more important, as men are ‘genetically programmed’ to stop and stay with beauty encompassing all that which might delight the senses, intelligence and humanity, and all that pleases the mind. Beautiful companies are those companies who combine aesthetics with social responsibility and who have realised that the unlimited and unaccountable pursuit of profit can be more destructive than creative. Giving commercial companies ethical and aesthetic meaning reverses modern processes of functional differentiation. ‘Beautiful’ companies as well as clean clothes and other ethical goods exemplify the increasing structural interpenetration of social subsystems of market economy, mediated culture and humanitarian ethics. Jeremy Rifkin has termed this new mode of capitalist economy ‘culture capitalism’. Whereas the process of linking capitalist economy with culture, especially pop culture, gained momentum in the 1960s, the nearly complete merger and syntheses of social subsystems is rather a new phenomenon.

In culture capitalism, the image of a product has become not only equally important as its use value; the image of the product is its true use value. The increased importance of the creation of meaning and the sphere of distribution can be illustrated by looking at the different

elements of the production and distribution process that make up the price of an ordinary culture good:



(Source: Clean Clothes Campaign)

The linkage between the sale of goods, and individual and collective identity formation has become the Achilles heel of consumer societies in late or second modernity. However, this linkage is fragile and fluid. As consumer acts are reflexive and dependent on a conscious approval by consumers of the product, the approval of a product or company can be withdrawn any time the consumer changes her or his mind. The symbolic loading of goods has created a demand well above the level of existential needs and objective use value. At the same time consumer choices are increasingly vulnerable to disappointment and questioned as to whether they might not have been the right choices, especially given the multitude of offers of alternative goods of comparable quality and price. This increased reflexivity of consumption represents the strength and weakness of Western consumer societies: the precondition for a virtually endless market expansion as well as the option to opt out and to introduce ecological, human rights and social justice issues into the sphere of distribution. The ethical semantic loading of goods is often considered to be limited to middle-class based lifestyle shopping (Frank 2003). However, it is far from being limited exclusively to up-market consumer products. In recent years, cheap grocery chains, like Aldi and Lidl in Germany, have become targets of anti-corporate campaigns in Germany for their anti-unionist

politics and poor working conditions.¹ Since the growing recession of the late 1990s with its neo-liberal policies of welfare cuts and an enormous rise in unemployment rates – up to 5.2 million in March 2005 – consumers in Germany have become much more price conscious. Cheap chains like Aldi and Lidl have been the great winners in this trend towards cautious consumption, but they also have to compete fiercely as new and even cheaper chains have flooded the market with “Schnäppchen”, bargains of all kinds. The former pioneers of cheap shopping now try to hold their market shares by promising constantly low prices together with consistently good quality. Due to the fierce competition in the lower price segments of the market, they have become more vulnerable to damage to their company image. How sensitive cheap chains have become can be illustrated by a recent example of a tough response from an electronic retailer to an anti-corporate image campaign:

‘Geiz ist geil’ (‘Avarice is hip’) is a well-known motto of an ad campaign by ‘Saturn’, one of the major electronic retailers in Germany. A Westphalian company priest had taken up the selling motto and following the critical art of ad jamming he parodied its meaning by changing it to ‘Arm sein ist geil’ (‘Being poor is hip’), using the imaging style of the original ad to cover pictures illustrating the negative impacts of neo-liberal reform policies. The critical images soon became popular among political activists in the movement against neo-liberal social reforms and were seen on many protest marches in autumn 2004. The parodied company immediately put so much pressure on the priest and his parish community by threatening them with costly libel actions that they finally gave in and decided to withdraw the critical counter-ads.²

Examples of Euro-Asian anti-corporate campaigns³

The market has become a significant arena for cultural politics in a globalised world, where companies have become powerful global players and nation states have lost much of their power to regulate the economic and social practices of corporate actors. The vacant space of

¹ See also the campaign against Wal-Mart Stores, Inc., The US retailer giant received the Public Eye Awards 2005 in the category working rights in Davos – the others went to Dow Chemical (category human rights), Shell (category environment), KPMG (category taxes) and Nestlé (general public award). The awards are based on nominations by NGOs from 5 continents and have been awarded annually for six years in a public counter-event to the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos.

² In the US, Wal-Mart after already having started image campaigns in some regions has recently launched a nationwide ad in more than 100 US papers attacking its opponents and justifying the company's politics as intended to improve the life of all people.

³ See also: Baringhorst 2005b

the political regulation of globalised economic relations is filled by civil society organisations that put pressure on corporate actors in order to force them to accept social and ecological norms. Analysing European anti-corporate campaigns we can identify a plethora of diverse claims: companies are scandalised for violating human rights, for unfair trade, and inhuman labour conditions, for environmental damage and war-supporting trade or production. Of particular relevance in this context is the European ‘Clean Clothes Campaign’. Politicising the working conditions in predominantly Asian offshore clothing and shoe factories started in Europe in 1989, when a lockout in a clothing factory in the Philippines attracted the attention of activist groups in the Dutch and British solidarity movements. The C&A-subcontracted factory was located in a free trade zone and female labourers were fired because they had demanded a wage not below the legal minimum wage. Activists in Amsterdam raised public attention to the issue by burning clothes in front of C&A’s main store in Amsterdam and other public actions. In Britain, the NGO Tradecraft started a campaign that asked retailers ‘how clean their clothes are’. Drawing on solidarity actions with the Third World that were mobilised around the issue of labour conditions in the Asian C&A subcontractor, the Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC) was established in the Netherlands in 1991. Shortly afterwards similar networks operated under the same campaign name in other European countries. Today there are 12 Clean Clothes Campaigns in different European countries, comprising about 250 unions and NGOs that have consented to a Code of Conduct, set up in 1998. The Campaign explains retrospectively its origin with the “nerve” that the activities focusing on the Philippines had struck with European civil societies. ‘... (C)ampaigning for “Clean Clothes” provided a concrete way of taking up the political demands of women’s and labour organizations in the south at the same time: change the behaviour and the policies of TNC’s (transnational corporations, SB) and governments in the North, since they are responsible for the way people in the south live and work’ (Ascoly/Zeldenrust 1999: 2).

The CCC’s main goal is ‘Improving Working Conditions in the Global Garment Industry’, in particular focusing on the apparel and sportswear industry. Issues of global social justice that are addressed are respect for human and workers’ rights, decent working conditions, job security, a living wage, empowerment, and sustainable development in developing countries. Scandalised issues of injustices are framed as being caused by a global garment industry ‘which either have their roots in Western consumer-oriented culture based on our desire for inexpensive quality, individualized mass fashion or general conditions in developing countries, whose low standards of economic and political life give western multinational co-operations opportunities to manufacture good-quality clothes for the western consumer

market very inexpensively' (Micheletti 2004, 9; see also: Howard 1999, Fung/O'Rourke/Sabel 2001).

Consumers are called upon to inform themselves of labour conditions in the global garment industry and to take actions encompassing boycotting certain brands, using consumer guides, writing letters or e-mails to scandalised companies or governments, taking part in demonstrations, public spectacles or shareholder activism.

In order to link local political agendas to global issues of working conditions in the garment industry and to issues of international trade relations in general, CCC initiated in the Netherlands, Belgium, France and most recently also North-Rhine Westphalia in Germany campaigns to raise the awareness of local authorities to their global responsibility and to make them ethical consumers of textiles. Municipalities are asked to sign a resolution, stating that their procurement of public uniforms and garments will be put out to tender according to the international social standards defined by the CCC and model Code of Conduct (www.cleanclothes.org/campaign/communities.htm). A particular emphasis is put on the demand for textiles in schools, kindergartens and hospitals but uniforms and industrial clothing in other areas are also highlighted. 'Instead of asking consumers to focus only on the companies, we're now also asking them to focus on their (local) politicians.' Communities that outfit their employees in clean clothes can hang a 'Clean Clothes Community' sign at their city hall. Becoming a Clean Clothes Community means the municipality agrees to follow the criteria of the Fair Wear Foundation, a Dutch foundation set up to monitor and verify labour standards in the garment industry. Meanwhile, there are 213 municipalities alone in France that have committed themselves to the goals set by the CCC.

Current issues of particular support for Asian workers and civil society actors include:

- A campaign to reinstate 207 workers that were dismissed and suspended in March 2002 by North Sails Lanka (PVT), now Global Sports Lanka in Sri Lanka. The company had dismissed them because workers had gone on strike to protest against the cancellation of a quality bonus.
- A campaign to support Parkati, a worker dismissed from PT Tae Hwa factory in Indonesia in 1999 and to address labour rights violations in the factory, like inadequate wages, compulsory overtime, impossible work targets, denial of trade union rights, sexual harassment and verbal abuse. Tae Hwa is a sport shoe factory, 70-90% of whose production is bought by FILA. Thus campaigners have particularly addressed FILA to support the reinstatement of the dismissed worker and to improve conditions in the factory of their supplier.

- A campaign demanding the reinstatement of three executives of a recently formed union at MSP Sportswear in Thailand who were dismissed on 29 October 2004. As the Thai company is a supplier for Nike as well as the French company Decathlon, both are being approached to intervene on behalf of the dismissed workers and to ensure the respect for workers' rights in the factory of their supplier.
- A request for action in a case of union repression at a Sri Lankan factory producing rubber-coated gloves for North American and European brands. Solidarity action was requested by the Free Trade Zones & General Services Employees Union (formally Free Trade Zones Workers Union) following the dismissal of union members at the Workwear Lanka (Pvt) Ltd in Sri Lanka.
- Support for the Clean Clothes Campaign Task Force - Tamil Nadu to participate in their campaign to push for improvements in the textile mills in Vedasanthu, in the Dindigul district of Tamil Nadu in India. The task force, made up of 30 NGOs and 7 trade unions working on labour rights' issues in the region, complains in particular about the violation of workers' rights, including low wages and long working hours, forced overtime, age-based discrimination, intimidation and unjust dismissals, and the use of child labour.
- A condemnation of the killing of Chea Vichea, the president of the Free Trade Union of Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia, who was shot dead in Phnom Penh on 22 January 2004.
- Support of 'Dignity Return', a 'sweat free' garment operation based in Bangkok. Dignity Return is a clothing label on the fringe of Thailand's sprawling world of garment factories, but as the CCC comments 'it represents hope – and more – for the Thais churning out T-shirts and headbands bearing the stamp of this new label' (www.cleanclothes.org/news.htm).

While in 2003 Nike's labour practices in Indonesia have been major targets of solidarity mobilisation, recent campaigns address the so-called B-brands of the sportswear industry, e.g. Puma, Mizuno, Fila, Umbro, Asics, Lotto, Kappa. These B-brands of sportswear retailers have been particularly mobilised in a campaign centred on the global event of the Olympic Games in Athens in summer 2004. Explaining the shift in focus to lesser known brands, the CCC states on its website: the CCC 'believes that retailers and brand-name companies are responsible for the working conditions in which their products are made... The so-called A-brands have made efforts to clean up their act and we will continue to push them to bring their purchasing practices in line with their stated labour policies. But we intend to target the

brands that have kept out of the spotlight because the entire industry has to change in order to make a difference' (www.fairolympics.org/en/issues/faq.htm). With the aim of using the image of sporting heroes to highlight the campaign ethics, athletes who are sponsored by these brands are asked to dump their sponsors. On the assumption that the International Olympic Committee is 'one of the most influential players to lead change in the sportswear industry' the IOC was asked to include respect for labour in their rules.

By scandalising poor labour conditions in Asian and Latin American clothing factories, the Clean Clothes Campaign does not only try to influence industrial relations in developing countries. The campaign against Triumph International shows that it can also have a significant impact on human rights issues in dictatorships by pressing companies to pull out of brutal military regimes. Initiated by an appeal by the exile Federation of Trade Unions - Burma (FTUB) and Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of Burma's struggle for democracy and the National League for Democracy, the CCC supported a campaign to demand the Switzerland-based garment company Triumph International to close down its factory near Rangoon in Burma. The decision was prompted by a public debate in Europe about the political situation in Burma, a debate that, according to a press release from Triumph International, 'has become increasingly emotional and that has led to planning uncertainties which Triumph can no longer accept.' The scandalised company rightly highlights in its comment the problematic of the impact of the 'boycott Burma actions' on the local workforce. In its press release the company stated: 'In an attempt to avoid laying-off the approximately 1,000 employees in Myanmar, Triumph held negotiations with various interested parties for several months. Despite intensive efforts, however, no buyer could be found. As a result, Triumph has decided in consensus with its European works council to gradually close the production. Triumph is working on a social plan to help the employees affected by this closedown. Triumph very much regrets having to take this step. Despite the proposed social plan, the production closedown in Myanmar is bound to cause great personal problems for the employees concerned something that Triumph has been working hard to avoid up to the last minute' (www.cleanclothes.org/companies/triumph02-01-28.htm). In autumn 2003, the Swiss agro giant Fenico and the Swiss retailer chain Migros followed suit and stopped their imports from Burma.

The majority of anti-corporate campaigns focus on labour conditions, ecological impact, fair trade and human rights. However, there is another interesting issue that brings Asian and European activists together: European and Indian Animal Rights activists have cooperated successfully in scandalising DaimlerChrysler as well as leather importing companies like

Gerry Weber and Kaufhof because of cruelty towards animals, and for violating Indian animal protection law in particular. The campaigns are launched and coordinated by PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), the biggest animal rights organisation worldwide. On 1 April 2004, supported by Grammy award winner Ravi Shankar, PETA India announced it was suing the Indian government in the Indian Supreme Court for failing to reduce the suffering of Indian animals that are used for the leather and meat industry. An Indian reform initiative, launched by PETA together with the Indian Council for Leather Exports, is being particularly supported by the German branch of PETA because Germany was the biggest import country for leather and leather products from India in 2002/03. While in Europe, at Mercedes Benz in Stuttgart, Vienna, Cologne and Frankfurt, cows were slaughtered on Mercedes Benz top class models in order to draw public attention to the unnecessary and cruel use of leather for seat covers and to PETA's claim to force DaimlerChrysler to offer every top model also in a leather-free version, Indian activists put particular pressure on the Indian branch of the global company. Supporting the Indian initiative, in September 2003 Maneka Gandhi, then member of the Indian Parliament and daughter-in-law of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, wrote an open letter threatening to launch a big campaign, together with known religious, political, trade and local authority representatives, against DaimlerChrysler and its Indian brands if the company did not offer all its models in a leather-free version. The impact on DaimlerChrysler soon gave way to action: it publicly announced that from 2004 onwards all E-class models manufactured in India would also be available leather-free and that leather-free S-class models that have to be imported would be available at the same price as S-class models with leather seats produced in India.

An interesting further case of mobilising consumer power to influence trade and labour conditions in Asia and other developing regions is the growth of the sale of so-called fair trade products, for instance tea. While anti-sweatshop campaigns even if not explicitly — as in the case of the CCC — call upon consumers to avoid buying products that are stigmatised by the label of social injustice and repression, fair trade campaigns appeal to the citizen consumer not to make a negative, but to make a positive choice. This has been particularly successful so far regarding coffee and tea products. However, when it comes to products of a much more complex production process, as is the case with most textile and other manufactured products, identifying impeccable products is rather more difficult. Thus, although there are labels that certify elements of ethical production, there have been only a few attempts so far to introduce fair textile or sportswear products to the market. An interesting more recent attempt is an initiative by the Canadian-based Adbusters organisation

to sell a 'Blackspot sneaker' '1 Pair = 1 Vote'. The shoe is said to 'comply with vegan standards', and is being 'monitored by Robin Webb of Vegetarian Shoes in the UK', and produced in a rural region of Portugal in a factory owned by a family with 'a reputation for being excellent employers'

(<http://www.adbusters.org/metaspots/corpo/blackspotsneaker/behindtheshoe.html> 16.02.05). The organisation explains the antipreneurial entrepreneurial initiative as entering into competition with companies facing criticism to establish a "worldwide consumer cooperative and to reassert consumer sovereignty over capitalism"

(<http://www.adbusters.org/metaspots/corpo/blackspotsneaker/vote.html> 16.02.05).

Buying a Blackspot sneaker gives consumers automatically a vote in 'The Blackspot Anticorporation' – an act of self-empowerment that bears interesting similarities to early socialist attempts to circumvent the influence of retailers.

The use of new and old media in Euro-Asian action networks

Anti-corporate campaigns are usually driven by concern over the human costs of global trade. They are responding to a globalised culture of capitalism and a trend to link individual and collective identity formation with the purchase of goods. Apart from that, they are heavily influenced by a new technological opportunity structure that is most of all shaped by new information communication technology (ICT) (cf. Bullert 2000; Blood 2000; Micheletti 2004: 8).

The British political communication expert Margaret Scammel has summed up the impact of ICT in the empowerment of consumers and thus the rise of political consumerism as follows: 'Digital technology is re-writing the rules of the marketplace. It is democratising the information environment, transforming what Kotler calls the "asymmetry" between sellers and customers. Sellers typically have had greater access to and better control of market information and could effectively set the terms, while consumers mostly relied on shortcuts such as brand recognition, reputation and consumer advice media. The Internet allows buyers to compare prices and product attributes in minutes, facilitated by consumer information websites.'... 'At the same time the consumer is offered considerably expanded choice. Digital deregulated markets lower the costs of entry for new producers and substantially reduce, or make irrelevant, barriers of time and space' (Scammel 2003: 5). ICT enables not only individual consumers to improve their knowledge base for informed product selection, it also enables civil society organisations to operate more effectively than before.

Taking as a starting point Rogers' definition of campaigns, they can be described as a 'pre-planned set of communication activities designed by change agents to achieve certain changes in receiver behavior in a specified time period' (Rogers 1973: 277).

If transnational campaigns want to be successful they have to fulfil the following essential functions (Lahusen 1996):

- The development of organised action programmes based on strategic planning of interaction between conflict actors and the coordination of collective action.
- Focusing public attention on selected issues and generating public pressure through moralisation and protest dramatisation oriented to the news factors of mass media news production.
- The generation and stabilisation of action networks through resource mobilisation, means of political participation, and the mobilisation of collective identities among supporters.
- Vertical integration, i.e. coordination and linking of diverse spatial dimensions of action through the integration of local, regional, national and global actors and arenas.
- Horizontal integration of polycentric networks, i.e. cooperation with actors in diverse social subsystems like mass media, politics, economics and science.

The Internet has significantly facilitated the implementation of all these different functions and lowered the costs and enhanced the speed of basic communication. It also offers particular opportunities for highly flexible, diverse and transnational civil society organisations to spread information and to offer new means of post-conventional political participation for supporters, whilst simultaneously fulfilling the difficult task of coordinating and vertically and horizontally integrating diverse action networks. Although technically, political participation could be facilitated and movement action programmes and framing strategies could become the result of network wide discourses, not all civil society organisations make use of this new participatory means in the same way. Mario Diani suggested a useful distinction concerning resource mobilisation strategies between organisations that rely on 'professional resources' or those that rely more on 'participatory resources' (Diani 2001: 122f.). Organisations with strong grassroots-orientation are usually organised less hierarchically, and thus could benefit from digital communication technology to improve internal communication and coordination of action programmes. Organisations that are more hierarchically structured and that ask from its members little more than membership fees and donations are less prone to discuss action programmes with members and to generate feelings of collective identity among them. Of the professional movement

organisations, those international CSOs in particular that operate with highly confrontational strategies (e.g. Greenpeace or PETA) can take advantage of new ICTs. These organisations can strategically use accelerated communication processes to improve conflict dramatisation and put attacked companies under pressure.

Whether ICTs facilitate or hinder collective identity formation among supporters is still an open question. So far, the visibility of political actors has always played an important role in identity formation. For many political communication experts it also represents a *sine qua non* of public accountability, and thus the essential requirement of democratic legitimisation.

Charles Tilly (2004) has expressed his concern that transnational activist networks may be less sustainable and effective due to tenuous organisational ties and seemingly weak levels of activist commitment. Contrary to that, Bennett et al. (2004) have suggested a more positive, albeit hesitant, view on the impact of ICTs on collective identity formation within the Global Social Justice (GSJ) movement. Commenting on Tilly's scepticism they argue 'These concerns may eventually prove well-founded as the story of the GSJ movement unfolds.

However, there is also a possibility that such concerns about sustainability and effectiveness also reflect perspectives on social movement organization that have been forged through observation of more conventional social protests focused within national cultural and institutional contexts' (Bennett et al. 2004: 29). Based on the findings of a cross-national study on political views and the use of information resources of supporters of anti-Iraq-war demonstrations in 2004, Bennett et. al. conclude: '...the networked activism at the base of recent large-scale transnational protests suggests a different organizational model in which inclusiveness and inter-organizational permeability are regarded as essential elements of overall movement sustainability and effectiveness' (Bennett et. al. 2004: 30).

Concerning the visibility of protest actors there is still research needed on the "Anschlusskommunikation" (Luhmann), i.e. the communicative link between the communication of movement organisations and the public arena, primarily shaped by audio-visual mass media communication. As can be seen by analysing the above-mentioned Euro-Asian anti-corporate campaigns, mass media visibility is most often organised somewhat parasitically: campaigns most commonly take advantage of the image of events and actors that draw their publicity from mass media communication.

1. Firstly, there is the brand itself. Protest usually focuses on companies that, like DaimlerChrysler, Triumph or Nike, have established a product brand or company image that is globally known or at least widely known to citizen consumers in the spatial arena addressed.

2. Secondly, campaign organisations try to link the scandalised issues of human rights violations or inhuman labour conditions to transnational media events. The CCC has successfully linked their issues to European or global sports events like the soccer World Cup in Korea in 2002 or the Olympic Games in Athens last summer. The Play Fair at the Olympics campaign, supported by CCC together with Global Unions – including the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers’ Federation (ITGLWF) – and Oxfam had launched a plethora of imaginative events in 35 countries in the months up to the Olympics that had caught significant media coverage. 550,000 signatures were gathered in a petition to be presented to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in Athens. When the IOC, however, turned down the opportunity to receive the petition, signatures were presented to the public via a rooftop media event. On August 10th, an Athens hotel rooftop overlooking the Acropolis was turned into a sportswear factory for a while. Women wearing white masks to draw attention to the fact that the working lives of women in sportswear production are usually hidden from public attention worked behind sewing machines. The ‘sew-in’ on top of Athens Titania Hotel gained a lot of media coverage around the world. A photo of the stunt even was the main photo of the week on the BBC website.



3. Like many other social movements, transnational anti-corporate campaigns enhance public visibility by benefiting from the testimonial of pop stars or other VIPs. The

above-cited campaigns feature prominent testimonials from the daughter-in-law of Indira Gandhi or Ravi Shankar. In the case of the CCC, one should mention the attempt to mobilise support from known athletes. Supporters of the Play Fair at the Olympics campaign include Spanish cyclist Miguel Indurain, Dutch long distance runner Kamiel Maase and the French World Cup soccer player Didier Deschamps. However, although the campaign managed to get support from some athletes the really major sport stars are on the payroll of the campaign's opponents. As sports is heavily dependent on sponsoring and known athletes are offered enormous sums to figure as ad icons, critical consumer campaigns probably have to make the best of B-stars or retired A-stars like the German gold medal athlete Heike Henkel.

Impact of anti-corporate campaigns on political empowerment and social and economic development

Referring to the 'Battle in Seattle' in 1999 and drawing on Mittelman (2000), Bennett argues that the Internet was not only important in the organisation of simultaneous protest, but also essential for the global imaging of those events chiefly through new Internet-based news resources like Indymedia. He asserts that the 'technological refiguring of space, time, and social identification' promoted a counter-hegemonic cosmopolitan consciousness that is characterised as being less distinctively nationalistic than global, as being less rooted in ascribed social group membership than in individual choices of social networks, and by de-emphasised ideological discourses (Bennett 2003: 27-28).

The European-Asian anti-corporate campaigns mentioned confirm the transformation of resistance described by Bennett and Mittelman. However, the spatial broadening of networks that link Asian factory workers virtually with European high street consumers should not be taken as a comforting sign that the global economic divide has been solved by transnational civil society organisations overcoming the digital divide.

Anheier and Katz have shown the relevance of a continuing global divide by mapping global civil society (2003, 241-158). Using correspondence analysis, they have examined the organisational infrastructure of global civil society, measured by the density of International Non-Government Organisations (INGOs), against factors measuring different aspects of globalisation like outbound foreign direct investment, human development index, extent of political participation among populations, acknowledgement among populations of tolerance and respect for others as a core value, number of phone lines per 1,000 population, foreign

travel per 1,000 population, human rights violations, and number of international treaties ratified. According to their findings the primary characteristics of countries with high INGO densities are:

- ‘high levels of outbound foreign direct investment, as an indicator of economic globalisation;
- high human development indicators (income, education, life expectancy);
- high levels of political activity and participation;
- high levels of cosmopolitan values, measured by tolerance and respect for others;
- high communication density (phone lines);
- high international travel volumes;
- low extent of human rights violations; and
- high number of ratifications of international treaties’ (ibid: 256).

The congruency found between different drivers of globalisation occurs not only in the high but also in the low extremes of INGO density: the mid-range, however, still seems to be less clear in the interconnectedness of development factors. Taking Anheier’s and Katz’s correspondence analyses, it is not surprising that we also find a marked concentration of movement organisation headquarters in Europe or North America in the field of anti-corporate campaigns. The relationship between Civil Society Organisations campaigning for corporate social responsibility seems to reproduce the dependency structure of global or even inter-regional power relations: ‘Northern CSOs generally act on behalf of others, whether dolphins or children, exercise leverage in Northern centers of power, Southern CSOs tend to represent the victims of corporate behaviour more directly’ (Oliviero/Simmons 2002, 77). However, the cited campaign activities also show that Asian factory workers are not only victims of scandalised labour conditions. Without their strike actions scandalised lockouts by companies would not have occurred. It is their unions and workers representatives that appeal to INGOs to support them in their local collective actions. It is the local branches of networks like the Clean Clothes Campaign Task Force – Tamil Nadu or PETA India that play a vital role in linking European and Asian collective action. Anti-corporate campaigning is only successful when following a multi-pressure point strategy incorporating different regions and actors. In an internal evaluation report, the CCC particularly emphasises that it is vital for a campaign that ‘the pressure also has a local element; a local NGO has to support the action. Southern organizing is the most important element for success; otherwise, you may victimize the workers.’

Internet-based, anti-corporate campaigns thus can play an important role in reducing development gaps and create transnational action networks that draw public attention in western centres to rights violations in eastern peripheries, to the vital and largely uncontrolled power of economic global players in globalisation and to detrimental impacts of a deregulated world economy. However, the potential risks also inherent in this kind of anti-corporate campaigns should not be ignored:

- In terms of social status and lifeworld context there is a deep divide between Western consumer activists on behalf of Asian workers and the workers themselves. Western activists and shoppers, and the workers in developing countries live not only in different social and cultural worlds, ‘they will usually never even meet’ (Frank 2003: 374).
- Positively speaking, the new post-conventional kind of political action of citizen-consumers represent a rather low threshold of participation that is easy to cross physically and psychologically (Micheletti 2004, 3). However, the costs of individual participation are extremely uneven: while the European supporter has nothing to lose and can only win in terms of easily gained enlightened, good consumer-consciousness, the Asian counterparts on the factory floor risk their jobs, if not lives when supporting the campaigns.
- The loose character of the cooperation of NGOs and trade unions involved has some advantage, giving the opportunity to coordinate action and strategies flexibly and with changing cooperation partners. However, the heterogeneity of actors involved can also represent a severe problem, especially when on the local level of action interests of NGOs and trade unions collide on the question of legitimate representation of workers’ rights. Dana Frank has rightly pointed out that the potential weaknesses of current consumer–worker alliances ‘lie in how middle-class organizations dovetail with worker’s own activities and goals’ (Frank 2003: 374). Her critical questions on the power differential between consumers and workers should be considered before idealising the new consumer citizen power as the answer to global injustice. Campaigns have to be confronted with the question of how far they empower not only people as consumers but also as workers, and to what extent they support workers in building their own organisations.
- Apart from this, campaigns are selective in the choice of companies they attack and of the local issues in Asia they support: most vulnerable are those companies that have the most direct relationship with consumers. If a company’s policy cannot be

influenced by consumer boycotts or picketing in front of high street shops, it is not likely to become a focal point of transnational campaigns.

- Furthermore, it is unclear whether companies with globally known brands are not an essential precondition for introducing norms and reforms of industrial relations in developing countries. Targeting of giant corporations ignores the fact that it is especially those giants that can afford to maintain standards of acceptable capitalist practice. Monitoring of standards would be less easy without those giants and overall not likely to be better.
- Triumph's pullout of Burma has shown that political consumer action in Europe can have a detrimental impact on local economies. Are the gains of sanctioning violations of rights always worth the costs? And more importantly who is paying the costs of European political consumerism in the end? There is a high risk that retailers scandalised for violations at supplying factories in developing countries react to public pressure by cutting their orders to those factories. If local producing companies are shut down or retailers go elsewhere, local workers are worse off. As happened with the British retailer Marks and Spencer, companies can also use public pressure as an excuse to end a contract with producers that they wanted to cut anyway mainly because of a loss of market share.
- Civil society organisations have to consider short-term as well as potential long-term effects. There is much further research necessary to evaluate the effect of anti-corporate campaigns on workers' struggles in production countries. Necessary conditions of long-term positive effects of transnational campaigns seem to be:
 1. the strength of local partners in the transnational action network to continue the struggle even after media attention has shifted to other issues.
 2. the monitoring of enforcing agreements that emerge from protest action. Trust in companies' intention to change is good, however, independent certification and monitoring is better.

Due to the potential of new ICTs, anti-corporate campaigns can play a significant role in rising transnational — if not even global — public awareness of the violation of workers' rights as well as human rights in general. Increased opportunities to connect global protest networks and to support local actors in conflicts with companies have increased the general demand for corporate responsibility and the public awareness of rights violations of all kinds. However, increased opportunities to mobilise public pressure in transnational campaigns also means increased responsibility on the part of civil society actors. The danger of exacerbating

situations in developing countries by comforting a good consumer conscience in the West can only be overcome by increased critical self-reflection and a process of continuing evaluation of the short and long-term impact of consumer campaigns.

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