

## **Globalising consumers: the history of consumerism as a socio-political movement**

*Matthew Hilton*

In the literature on new social movements, the organised consumer movement has not so much been overlooked but understandably excluded from an analysis which has sought to highlight specifically new forms of political engagement associated with the post-Second World War period. Consumerism, that is the organised attempts to fight for better value for money for individual shoppers in the marketplace, has clearly lacked the more obvious radical undercurrents of environmentalism, feminism or the peace movement. Likewise, in its focus on everyday goods, it could never hope to attract the broad attention of the media and the public in the same manner as, for instance, the human rights groups. Consumerism has often been regarded as a transient interest, the abuses of the marketplace attracting the attention of disgruntled consumers at specific moments in time, yet it remains an interest lacking an ideological or political core which could attract a truly mass base whose commitment could be sustained over a significant period.

But such a view overlooks much of the work of comparative-testing consumer organisations. Magazines such as *Test*, *Que Choisir*, *Consumer Reports* and *Which?* have been usually associated with the urban professional middle classes, as guides to their consuming lives, yet many of the organisations behind them have been involved in a range of political issues which suggest important parallels and similarities to other social movements. Furthermore, the magazines themselves have attracted literally millions of subscribers from all over the world and while such figures are not directly equivalent to the committed donations of members of environmental and human rights organisations, a sizeable minority of consumers have regarded themselves as part of a social movement helping to make the market a safer, fairer and more just place for everybody. The following summary of the modern international consumer movement will demonstrate both the extent to which consumers have been prepared to organise as critics of the marketplace and their commitment to correcting abuses which not only assist the affluent individual but consumers as a whole. It will begin by overviewing the growth of the modern consumer movement in western Europe and America from the 1930s onwards, before moving on, in the second half of the paper, to highlight certain aspects of the international consumer movement. It will demonstrate the extent to which an essentially western-based comparative testing movement was able to adapt to the consumer concerns of the developing – that is the concerns over access to basic needs – and the ways in which these resulted in a new politics of consumption which came to have a profound influence on the shape and nature of global civil society in the 1980s. What such an examination will demonstrate is the ways in which consumers have sought to act as political agents in the marketplace rather than as the passive recipients of the fruits of economic growth.

### **The growth of the modern consumer movement in comparative perspective**

The modern, comparative-testing form of consumer expertise began in the United States. In 1927, a civil servant for the Labor Bureau, Stuart Chase, and an engineer, F. J. Schlink, published *Your Money's Worth*, a critique of the exploitation of the

consumer in the modern marketplace.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on Veblen-esque attacks on consumption as well as anti-trust traditions within American politics, the book epitomised a desire to empower the consumer that was one of the founding principles of Consumers' Research, which began publishing its *Bulletin* in 1929. Consumers' Research sought to overcome the ignorance of the consumer and make him or her adept at assessing the quality of goods while at the same time maintaining a healthy distance from modern commercial values. It rode the wave of a developing consumer consciousness in 1930s America which saw the establishment of a consumer infrastructure within the New Deal bodies and the flourishing of several other consumer organisations.<sup>2</sup> However, in 1936, a strike broke out among Consumers' Research staff and in the ensuing split, Arthur Kallet, a former collaborator of Schlink, went on to form the longer lasting, and ultimately more successful, Consumers Union. Schlink would later denounce his former radical colleagues – now connected to Consumers Union (CU) – as Marxists, especially since the new organisation did make efforts to link its model of consumerism with the social and economic concerns of the labour movement. But by the end of the 1950s, when it had asserted its non-political role to the House Un-American Activities Committee, CU had been steered by its President, Colston Warne, and the socially conservative tendencies of the readers of *Consumer Reports*, towards a focus on value-for-money testing. This is not to say that CU has not gone on to support a number of social and economic issues, but its primary focus on testing has proved extremely popular with American shoppers. It has remained a financially successful publishing organisation and it has had an uneasy relationship with some of the more aggressive voices in post-war American consumerism, most notably that of Ralph Nader.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, the focus on the testing of goods and services was clearly an inspiration to European shoppers. In the 1950s, a number of consumer testing organisations began to emerge. In France, in 1951, the Union Fédéral des Consommateurs (UFC) was formed and began publishing its testing magazine, *Que Choisir*, in December 1961. The UFC was soon joined by family and rural groups which had formed just previously in the 1940s as well as co-operative organisations and trade unionists through bodies such as the Organisation Generale des Consommateurs (ORGECO, 1959), set up specifically to represent consumers who were also union members. In response, the state initially created the National Consumer Council (Conseil National de la Consommation) in 1960 to act as a forum for consumers to interact with government, though this has been followed with more comprehensive measures, most notably the National Consumption Institute (Institut National de la Consommation) in 1968, which published *50 millions de*

---

<sup>1</sup> S. Chase & F. J. Schlink, *Your Money's Worth: A Study in the Waste of the Consumer's Dollar* (New York: Macmillan, 1927).

<sup>2</sup> L. Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003); M. Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); G. Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Kathleen G. Donohue, *Freedom from Want: American Liberalism and the Idea of the Consumer* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> L. B. Glickman, 'The strike in the temple of consumption: consumer activism and twentieth-century American political culture', *Journal of American History*, 88:1, 2001, pp. 99-128; Robert N. Mayer, *The Consumer Movement: Guardians of the Marketplace* (Boston, MA.: Twayne, 1989); Norman Isaac Silber, *Test and Protest: The Influence of Consumers Union* (NY: Holmes & Meier, 1983); M. Pertschuk, *Revolt Against Regulation: The Rise and Pause of the Consumer Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

*consommateurs* from 1970, and the creation in 1976 of a secretariat of State for Consumption, converted into a full ministry by Mitterand in 1981.<sup>4</sup>

Organised consumerism in France has resembled something of a social movement. By 1978, 3% of the adult French population identified themselves as members of a consumer organisation, while 27% claimed to be willing to join one. Furthermore, in 1976, 800 ‘clubs de consommateurs’ around the country were affiliated to the Associations populaires familiales, inspired and motivated by such campaigns as the 3-6-9 boycott which urged protesting consumers to stop buying meat for three days, fruit for six, and mineral water for nine.<sup>5</sup> While no other European country witnessed such high levels of grassroots mobilisation, it is clear that French consumers were responding in part to a set of general issues facing a rising generation of affluent shoppers. That is, as western economies moved into an increasingly technological and complex age, where the traditional skills attributed to the housewife-shopper were no longer useful in the assessment of products, both male and female consumers sought institutional support to guide and protect them through the marketplace. Thus, it was not only the UFC which mirrored the activities of the American Consumers Union. In the Netherlands, Consumentenbond was formed in 1953, joining other rural, family and women’s bodies, which had increasingly turned their attention to consumer affairs in the period of economic growth. Consumentenbond has, however, remained the pre-eminent consumer organisation, its 650,000 members or subscribers to its testing magazine in the late 1990s representing the highest market penetration rate of any consumer publication in the world, reaching one out of every nine Dutch families.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in Belgium, the Association des Consommateurs was formed in 1957 as a private organisation of individual shoppers keen to imitate the success of *Consumer Reports*. In 1993, it had 325,000 member subscribers and has played a leading role internationally in promoting consumer organising. At home, while it has always been the most prominent consumer organisation, it has also worked alongside a wider network, spearheaded by the women’s, co-operative and labour movement which came together to form, in 1959, the Union Féminine pour l’Information et la Défense des Consommateurs, although this ended in 1984 when the authorities withdrew their financial support.<sup>7</sup>

In financial terms at least, though, the most successful imitator of the American product-testing model has been the United Kingdom’s Consumers’ Association (CA). Formed in 1956 by a group of professionals broadly, if not entirely, associated with the centre-left traditions of the British Labour Party, CA first began publishing *Which?* in 1957. Its success was immediate and membership peaked in 1987 when subscriptions to *Which?* reached one million. While its core work has remained servicing its members with better information about the quality of branded

---

<sup>4</sup> G. Trumbull, *The Contested Consumer: The Politics of Product Market Regulation in France and Germany* (forthcoming); L. Bihl, *Consommateur: Défends-toi!* (Paris: Denoël, 1976); G. Trumbull, ‘Strategies of consumer group mobilisation: France and Germany in the 1970s’, in M. Daunton & M. Hilton (eds.), *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), pp. 261-282; A. Morin, ‘French consumer movement’, in Brobeck *et al.*, *Encyclopaedia*, pp. 279-283.

<sup>5</sup> Trumbull, *Contested Consumer*.

<sup>6</sup> Joop Koopman, ‘Dutch consumer movement’, in S. Brobeck, R. N. Mayer & R. O. Herrmann (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of the Consumer Movement* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1997), pp. 227-232; Consumers International, *Balancing the Scales, Part 2: Consumer Protection in the Netherlands and Germany* (London: Consumers International, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> T. Bourgoignie & A-C. Lacoste, ‘Belgian consumer movement’, in Brobeck *et al.*, *Encyclopaedia*, pp. 61-64.

products, the income generated from the sale of its magazine has enabled CA to play a leading role internationally and to become a prominent advocate at the national level. Although it is a purely private organisation, it has maintained a close relationship with the state and its staff and ideas have heavily influenced such government initiatives as the Consumer Council in the 1960s, the Office of Fair Trading from 1973 and the National Consumer Council from 1975. Furthermore, it also gave rise to something of a social movement. In the 1960s it encouraged the establishment of local consumer groups around the country. For the moderately-minded professionals associated with post-war planning and economic regeneration – lawyers, engineers, managers and accountants – the groups offered the opportunity for a new type of citizen to play a role in local and national civic life. Although Britain never witnessed the same degree of grassroots consumer mobilisation as in France, by March 1963 there were 50 consumer groups in existence with a total of 5,000 members. They had all come together under the National Federation of Consumer Groups (NFCG) and, in 1967, the movement peaked with the existence of 100 groups and a total membership of 18,000 consumers.<sup>8</sup>

While the growth of the western European consumer movement attests to the importance of explaining its rise through variables such as affluence, an increasingly technical marketplace and the growth of advertising and sales techniques which confused individual shoppers, the experience of other countries should not blind us to the fact that much consumer motivation emerged from adversity and detriment rather than the perplexities of expanding choices. Private testing organisations may have emerged in the 1950s, but they often found themselves working alongside pre-existing consumer groups, most notably co-operatives and women's organisations, the former of which had been recognised as the principal consumer experts in periods of necessity, and the latter of which had risen to prominence as consumer experts in the Second World War. In Japan, the main organisations which have become the dominant spokesbodies for consumers in an age of affluence all emerged in the period of shortages, rationing and controls associated with the Allied occupation in the late-1940s and early 1950s. Women especially protested against the restrictions of a recovering marketplace, leading to the establishment of organisations such as the Japanese Federation of Housewives' Associations (Shufuren) in 1948 which, by the 1990s, consisted of 400 local affiliates from all around the country. Other, more conservative, women's organisations have further bolstered the movement and, even as the Japanese began to enjoy unprecedented levels of economic prosperity, local co-operative clubs have flourished, a movement which, if highly diverse, nevertheless boasts 44 million members as housewives in particular have sought to maintain a greater degree of control over an increasingly anonymous and alien marketplace.<sup>9</sup>

What the Japanese situation highlights is the specificity of different national consumption regimes. The factors which gave rise to consumer organising across the industrialised world may have been remarkably similar but how this consumer

---

<sup>8</sup> G. Smith, *The Consumer Interest* (London: Gollancz, 1982); M. Hilton, 'The polyester-flannelled philanthropists: the Birmingham Consumers' Group and affluent Britain' in L. Black & H. Pemberton (eds.), *An Affluent Society? Britain's Post-War "Golden Age" Revisited* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 149-165; M. Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Search for a Historical Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); L. Black, 'Which?craft in post-war Britain: the Consumers' Association and the politics of affluence', *Albion*, 36:1, 2004, pp. 52-82.

<sup>9</sup> P. L. Maclachlan, *Consumer Politics in Postwar Japan: The Institutional Boundaries of Citizen Activism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); D. Vogel, 'Consumer protection and protectionism in Japan', *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 18:1, 1992, pp. 119-154; M. Imai, 'Japanese consumer movement', in Brobeck *et al.*, *Encyclopedia*, pp. 341-342.

consciousness manifested itself as a consumer politics varied from one state to the next. Again, in Japan, the collective responsibilities of consumers have been just as relevant as their individual rights and this has meant consumer organisations have recognised the importance of protecting fledgling Japanese industries and agriculture. This has led many commentators on Japan to conclude that its consumer movement has been especially pro-business.<sup>10</sup> Recently, this view has been overturned by Maclachlan's in-depth study of consumer politics which stresses the oppositional voice of Japanese consumer groups. Nevertheless, business and commercial interests have clearly eclipsed consumer voices within national public and private institutions and thus a large grass-roots consumer movement has had very little impact on economic and social policy when compared to, for instance, the United States. There, a more plural central bureaucracy has created a diverse number of opportunities – and, consequently, strategies – for consumer activists to pursue and, prior to an anti-consumer backlash beginning in the late 1970s, a more aggressive form of consumer politics was able to emerge in the US which achieved notable victories both in the courts (through class actions suits) and in the legislature.

Different institutional contexts also provide part of the explanation as to why consumer movements have not taken off to the same extent at the grassroots level in other countries. In northern Europe, for instance, stronger state involvement in consumer protection measures has meant consumers have not had to flock to independent, and specifically consumer-based, organisations to realise their interests. In Germany, organisations of consumers emerged as elsewhere in the post-Second World War period, and the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Verbraucherbände* (AgV, Alliance of Consumer Associations) was established as early as 1953 which has subsequently gone on to co-ordinate different groups' activities, engage in consumer education and provide information to support its role as an advocacy organisation. However, it has not sought to become a mass movement, preferring instead to use its technical expertise to become an equal partner in the development of products and services. It has sought a negotiated role with government and, although business interests have predominated, the German consumer movement has developed a strong representative function. To some extent, this has meant the government has taken the initiative on many consumer activities. Several attempts had been made to start comparative testing magazines, but no lasting publication appeared until *Test* in 1966. German businesses had previously blocked the testing and reporting activities of AgV in the early 1960s, but with the support of the Social Democrats, a government-funded testing body, *Stiftung Warentest*, was established to publish *Test*. By the 1990s, sales had reached one million, and *Stiftung Warentest* was no longer reliant on government subsidies. As the pre-eminent national consumer publication, *Test* differs from other European publications, since the constitution of *Stiftung Warentest* allows for the input of business at all levels of the product examinations. This, in essence, reflects the German consumer protection regime more generally. German consumers have an impressive representative and negotiating role at the federal level (a situation replicated at the state level thanks to the creation of state-based *Verbraucherbände*), though this is strongest only in technical areas. What the absence of a strong, independent consumer movement has meant is that German consumer groups have

---

<sup>10</sup> K. van Wolferen, *The Enigma of Japanese Power* (New York: Vintage, 1990); G. Fields, *Gucci on the Ginza* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1989).

not enjoyed the same freedom of action or ability to set their own agendas as, for instance, in the French case.<sup>11</sup>

In Scandinavia, limited populations have been held to prevent the economies of scale enjoyed by testing magazines with a mass circulation and thus, no such organisation as the Consumers' Association or Consumers Union has been able to emerge. Beyond this, however, strong co-operative, trade union and social democratic traditions have ensured the state has often initiated a range of consumer interest activities that have elsewhere emerged from 'below'. In Sweden, for instance, involvement in consumer affairs in the 1940s and 1950s by trade unions, co-operatives, voluntary and women's organisations was later taken up by the state (i.e., the Statens Konsumentråd). Later still, Sweden established the world's first consumer ombudsman as well as a Market Court in 1971 and, in 1973, the state-sponsored National Board for Consumer Policies (Konsumentverket, merging with the ombudsman in 1976). With such top-down consumer protection, no national federation of independent consumer groups was thought necessary until the Co-operative Union established a Consumer Policy Council to serve as a forum for the co-operative, labour and consumer movements (becoming the Consumer Council from 1992). In Sweden, then, the role of the state has been particularly strong and it has offered a specifically Scandinavian model of consumer protection which has been an inspiration for consumer movements elsewhere campaigning for greater state intervention. However, it has also ensured a consumer consciousness has been directed away from those organisations usually held to be more typical of a social movement.<sup>12</sup>

### **The global consumer movement**

To varying degrees at the national level, then, the desire for greater guidance in the marketplace gave rise to comparative testing magazines and the emergence of organised consumerism as something of a social movement. However, where the consumer movement has most closely resembled the new social movements of environmentalism or the peace movement, is in the international arena. In 1960 the First International Conference on Consumer Testing was held to discuss opportunities for future collaborative efforts between the principal national consumer organisations of western Europe and North America. Significantly, this led to the further establishment of the International Organisation of Consumers' Unions (IOCU), consisting of the four comparative testing organisations from France, Belgium, the Netherlands and the UK that had been largely founded on the American model, as well as US Consumers' Union. The original aims of the new body were simply to extend and assist comparative testing consumerism, yet it soon extended beyond this model.<sup>13</sup>

The IOCU's growth was impressive. Although in 1970 its Council still consisted of the core of the five founding members, it had also co-opted the state-

---

<sup>11</sup> Trumbull, *Contested Consumer*; Consumers International, *Balancing the Scales, Part 2*; E. Kuhlmann, 'German consumer movement', in Brobeck *et al.*, *Encyclopaedia*, pp. 289-293.

<sup>12</sup> K. Blomqvist, 'Swedish consumer movement', in Brobeck *et al.*, *Encyclopaedia*, pp. 544-547; Consumers International, *Balancing the Scales, Part 1: Consumer Protection in Sweden and the United Kingdom* (London: Consumers International, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> F. G. Sim, *IOCU on Record: A Documentary History of the International Organisation of Consumers Unions, 1960-1990* (New York: Consumers Union, 1991), p. 27.

assisted, publicly-funded consumer organisations of Germany and Scandinavia. Moreover, its membership had grown to include representatives from Asia, Africa and Latin America, if only from the richest nations of these areas.<sup>14</sup> By 1990, however, the IOCU had extended well beyond the affluent West. The Council now consisted of representatives of most Western European states, but also of consumer organisations in Argentina, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Jamaica, Japan, Mauritius, Mexico, Poland and South Korea. An Executive had been formed which showed the domination of the founding members (excluding Belgium) though even here South Korea and Mauritius were represented and the Presidency was held by Erna Witoelar of the Yayasan Lembaga Konsumen, Indonesia.<sup>15</sup> Today, the IOCU is called Consumers International, and in November of 2003 it held its 17<sup>th</sup> World Congress in Lisbon, Portugal. Its headquarters are in London, but there are thriving regional offices in Africa, Asia and Latin America. At the turn of the millennium, it had 253 members from 115 different countries which ranged from all the states of the western world to post-communist Eastern Europe and a whole collection of developing states (China, Chad, Guatemala, El Salvador, Gabon, Nigeria, Malawi and Burkina Faso) which, on first instinct, one might suppose had other interests that needed defending than those of consumers.<sup>16</sup> With such a global reach, it clearly extends further and beyond many other, more prominent, international non-government organisations.

The significance of the consumer movement as an international phenomenon lies in the political respectability it held within many western states and its ability to reach out to new consumer issues and consumer organisations in the non-affluent global South. Almost from the very beginning of its existence, IOCU decided to structure its activities in a manner in line with the American government's espousal of a rights-based liberalism. In March 1962, President Kennedy made a significant speech in the history of consumer protection. In it, he outlined four basic consumer rights that should act as the guiding principles for legislative and voluntary action: the right to safety; the right to be informed; the right to choose; and the right to be heard. The IOCU immediately incorporated these four rights as its own *raison d'être*, binding its member organisations to the pursuit of consumer protection ideals articulated and advanced from within a changing US context. Such a rights-based model was also at the heart of liberal politics internationally and IOCU was able to obtain a foothold within the institutions of the United Nations. It quickly had an influence with the UN Economic and Social Council and it went on to have a voice in other bodies such as the World Health Organisation and the Food and Agriculture Office. It has been granted Category I status within the General Assembly, enabling it to sit at the table and speak like a national delegation (although it cannot vote on issues). Just as the respectable professionals who made up the national consumer movements were often able to find a representative role within different states in the 1960s and 1970s, so too were they able to secure a role within the institutions of global governance. Due to IOCU lobbying, in 1982 the UN General Assembly voted to establish a Consolidated List of Banned Products, it has consistently advised on food standards (Codex Alimentarius) and, in 1985, it managed to establish the UN Guidelines on Consumer Protection which have acted as a model law for the

---

<sup>14</sup> IOCU, *Knowledge is Power: Consumer Goals in the 1970s. Proceedings of the 6<sup>th</sup> Biennial World Conference of the International Organisation of Consumers Unions* (London: IOCU, 1970), pp. 115-117.

<sup>15</sup> IOCU, *Consumer Power in the Nineties: Proceedings of the Thirteenth IOCU World Congress* (London: IOCU, 1991), p. 113.

<sup>16</sup> Consumers International, *Annual Report, 1999* (London, Consumers International, 1999), p. 37-41.

implementation of consumer protection regimes around the world. In the mid-1990s, these were subsequently extended by the UN Commission on Sustainable Development and the UN Economic and Social Council to include the promotion of sustainable consumption. Less successfully, but more indicative of the role IOCU was playing in global civil society, was the campaign it spearheaded to obtain a Code of Conduct for Multinational Corporations. This ultimately failed due to US opposition and the weakening of the social and economic role of the UN with the creation of the World Trade Organisation and the post-Uruguay Round global trading system. Nevertheless, by the 1980s, IOCU had become a leading NGO as civil society organisations increasingly looked to the UN to implement more socially-minded forms of global justice.<sup>17</sup>

Part of the explanation for IOCU's prominence at this time lies in the absence of other NGOs, compared to the explosion of civil society organisations in the 1990s, and partly because it developed new forms of campaign tactics which gave it a greater legitimacy as the spokesperson for civil society. As IOCU expanded into the developing world in the 1970s, it encountered new sets of consumer problems not experienced by affluent westerners. Firstly, it had to deal with the problem of baby food formulas which were marketed to developing world consumers as nutritious substitutes to breast milk. For poor consumers, such an expense was an unnecessary outlay, yet infant formula companies promoted their products as medical advances, even though evidence mounted that poor water supplies meant that babies were being fed disease-ridden foodstuffs.<sup>18</sup> Secondly, while the environmental movement and Rachel Carson's pioneering *Silent Spring* had raised the consciousness of American consumers to the dangers of pesticides, the problem seemed all the more acute for developing world consumers who were often exposed to the harmful chemicals in their roles as agricultural labourers as well.<sup>19</sup> Thirdly (although many other examples might also be cited), developing world consumer organisations were increasingly concerned about the high prices of western drugs and the inappropriate marketing of patent medicines which were either ineffective or were dangerous, the international pharmaceutical companies taking advantage of weak consumer protection legislation to dump products which had been banned in western markets.<sup>20</sup>

All three of these issues were subjects which fell within the remit of a variety of developmental NGO concerned with economic and social justice. Not all of these organisations had such a prominent voice as IOCU, however, particularly at the UN, while IOCU, for its part, was too diverse an organisation to be able to collect the primary evidence needed to mount campaigns against the alleged market abuses. The solution pioneered by IOCU was to create networks of pre-existing organisations prepared to work together on a specific issue. Although campaigning networks had clearly existed at the national level for some time, and more general networks – or federations – existed within the labour and women's movements, the creation of

---

<sup>17</sup> E. Peterson & J. M. Halloran, 'United Nations consumer protection', in Brobeck *et al.*, *Encyclopaedia*, pp. 581-583; D. Harland, 'The United Nations Guidelines for consumer protection', *Journal of Consumer Policy*, 10, 1987, pp. 245-266.

<sup>18</sup> C. Williams, *Milk and Murder: Address to the Rotary Club of Singapore in 1939* (Penang: IOCU-ROAP, 1986); IBFAN, *Babies, Breastfeeding and the Code: Report of the IBFAN ASIA Conference, Sam Phran, Thailand, 5-12 October 1986* (Penang: IOCU-ROAP, 1987).

<sup>19</sup> IOCU, *The Pesticide Handbook: Profiles for Action* (Penang: IOCU-ROAP, 1984); F. G. Sim, *The Pesticide Poisoning Report: A Survey of Some Asian Countries* (Penang: IOCU-ROAP, 1985).

<sup>20</sup> C. Medawar, *Drugs and World Health: An International Consumer Perspective* (London: Social Audit, 1984); IOCU, *Forty-Four Problem Drugs: A Consumer Action and Resource Kit on Pharmaceuticals* (Penang: IOCU-ROAP, 1981).

single-issue, international campaign networks in the late 1970s was an important precedent which in many ways still has a fundamental influence on the nature of global civil society today. In response to the three issues cited above, IOCU initiated the International Baby Food Action Network in 1979, Health Action International in 1981 and the Pesticide Action Network in 1982. Led and administered by IOCU, the networks brought together a variety of NGOs and enabled many smaller and – perhaps in the eyes of those who determined who could obtain a formal voice at the UN – less reputable groups to have a say in which issues should be brought to the attention of the UN. Not only did IBFAN, PAN and HAI, as well as other networks and campaigns at this time, provide a new direction for global activists, they focussed attention on the international marketplace and created further impetus for the campaign, for instance, to obtain a code of conduct on the activities of multinational corporations in the 1980s.<sup>21</sup>

Such campaigns also led to the incremental expansion of the consumer rights at the heart of IOCU's operating philosophy. Over the years, IOCU has added four more rights to those set out by Kennedy in 1962. They now include the right to redress; the right to consumer education; the right to a healthy environment; and the right to basic needs. These latter two rights in particular reflect the influence of the global South on the international consumer movement. The rights to a healthy environment and to basic needs are not so much rights but duties, since they invoke the responsibility of consumers to ensure that all other consumers can enjoy goods and services in an equally inhabitable environment, or else they call upon the duties of affluent western consumers to campaign to ensure that poor consumers around the world can also participate at the most basic level in the consumer society. As developing world consumer activists are keen to point out, if the right to basic needs is not met, then all other consumer rights effectively become meaningless. IOCU expanded in the 1960s and 1970s with a missionary fervour that thought better informed consumers could empower themselves to provide the correctives to imbalances of power within the marketplace. But as the focus of consumer concern in these new countries shifted from cars to rice and refrigeration to water supply, it soon became obvious that the majority of the world's consumers were facing a very different set of questions. As IOCU set up regional offices, first for the Asia Pacific in 1973 and then for Latin America in the late-1980s and for Africa in the 1990s, it took on board new agendas such that the politics of consumption has more often been concerned with meeting the demands of necessity rather than the desire for luxury.

## Conclusion

Since the 1990s, the number of international and national non-government organisations has increased exponentially. IOCU, or Consumers International as it is now known, has found itself just one voice among many campaigning on issues of

---

<sup>21</sup> G. Goldenman & S. Rengam, *Problem Pesticides, Pesticide Problems: A Citizens' Action Guide to the International Code of Conduct on the Distribution and Use of Pesticides* (Penang: PAN & IOCU-ROAP, 1988); K. Balasubramaniam, *Health and Pharmaceuticals in Developing Countries: Towards Social Justice and Equity* (Penang: CI-ROAP, 1996); IOCU & IBFAN, *Protecting Infant Health: A Health Workers' Guide to the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes* (Penang: IOCU & IBFAN, 1985); IBFAN, *Breaking the Rules 1991: A Worldwide Report on Violations of the WHO/UNICEF International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes* (Penang: IBFAN & IOCU-ROAP, 1991).

international trade, food sovereignty, public utilities and access to the world of consumption. The prominence it obtained in global civil society in the 1980s has therefore been eclipsed, especially since a new generation of consumer activist has emerged concerned more directly with fair trade and questions arising from globalisation. In this regard, the international consumer movement seems rooted in the period of post-Second World War affluence. Its particular take on the politics of consumption – value for money – is as much a product of the social and economic conditions of a particular moment in history, just as consumers' leagues grew at the turn of the twentieth-century from both a philanthropic and trade union traditions, and co-operatives – in Europe at least – flourished when the vast majority of consumers were concerned with basic needs rather than the comforts of a mass, technocratic market. The organised consumer movement associated with Consumers Union, Consumers' Association and IOCU is firmly rooted in the anxieties felt by many affluent consumers in an increasingly technical world, eager to enjoy the benefits of prosperity but worried too over the difficulties of negotiating their way in a more complex marketplace.

Yet this should not hide the wider social and economic concerns which grew out of comparative testing, nor the politics of consumption which came out of the struggles over necessity and poverty faced by many developing world consumer organisations. In the 1970s, as the international movement expanded across the globe among professional, educated groups, it did so at a time when the post-1973 economic recession was matched with an increasing awareness of issues of poverty in the west and a more assertive developing world civil society was eager to place questions of entitlement and deprivation on the global agenda. By the 1980s, therefore, consumerism had emerged as a movement concerned both with the rights to individual satisfaction but also the collective benefits emerging from different models of, and pathways to, economic development. The history of the consumer movement therefore demonstrates the persistent presence of the politics of consumption in contemporary society. While a new era of consumer activism associated with boycotts, ethical and green consumption, fair trade and anti-globalisation has reinvigorated debates about the nature of consumer society, the consumer movement of *Que Choisir*, *Test, Which?* and *Consumer Reports* attests to the ongoing debate over consumption since the rise of the co-operative movement in the nineteenth century. What all these institutions and forms of political activism have done is demonstrate that consumer society is by no means the source of apathy and passivity assumed by an earlier body of scholarship, but the site around which consumers have themselves mobilised to debate the shape, structure and extent of the society being built in their name.