



## The potential of consumer publics

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We are used to thinking of consumption as a private affair. Social theory and economics have classically understood the formation of the needs and desires that drive consumer action as something that occurs outside of the public domain; beyond the space of deliberation, driven by ‘the stomach or the fancy’ as Marx put it. And with the rise of a consumer society, such needs and desires have become increasingly administered, subject to techno-scientific discipline and intervention in that typically modern sphere of action, in between the private and the public, that Hannah Arendt (1958) called *society*.

It seems however that this state of affairs is changing. For a couple of decades now, sociologists and consumer researchers have pointed to the active and reflexive processes by which needs and desires are articulated, as consumers re-appropriate the programmed – in Arendt's sense of that term – elements of consumer society and re-elaborate and recreate them according to their own more or less autonomous ideas and visions.

In fact in the last decades we have seen the emergence and consolidation of a range of practices where the boundary between consumption and production is blurred and where both practices fuse into new forms of public action. These range from the value that consumers create around brands and products in their more or less creative and more or less orchestrated forms of interaction, via pursuits like Open Source and Free Software that involve thousands of participants in productive practices that are often motivated by allegiance to particular values or a particular ethos, rather than by direct monetary rewards (Kely, 2008; O’Neil, 2009), to emerging phenomena like Open Design, Open manufacturing, Urban Agriculture and Open Biotech that apply similar principles to material production (Carson, 2010; Delfanti, 2013). In addition,

similar forms of collaborative production that build on communicative practices of knowledge sharing, and where adherence to a common identity or project counts as a strong motivation, have been identified by management scholars as a strong and growing component to value creation in knowledge intensive organizations (Heckscher and Adler, 2006).

The emergence of these phenomena suggests that a new modality of value creation is affirming itself in the information economy. Moving outside of the traditional domains of markets and hierarchies, such forms of collaborative production are self-organized and they rely heavily on common resources (Bauwens, 2005; Benkler, 2006). Moreover, they contain a strong civic element in the sense that the values that are being created are not only economic but also ethical in a more traditional sense of that term (Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006; Coleman, 2012). In this article I will look at the phenomenon of collaborative consumer practices as one instance of this new emerging 'mode of production' (a strong term perhaps), in order to attempt to flesh out a theoretical vision of such collaborative production. I use the cautious term 'theoretical vision' because, since these are phenomena in emergence available data are scarce (but growing), and one needs to extrapolate and imagine a lot to fill the gaps. This article is thus a highly speculative piece; it seeks to envision what a theory could look like.

I will suggest that such a vision can be built by departing from the concepts of 'publics' and 'action' in a sense that combines the traditions of Gabriel Tarde and Hannah Arendt. In this essay I thus want to build a theory of consumption as *public action*. First, I will revisit the tradition of research that has emerged around the phenomenon of productive consumer practices to suggest that an approach that departs from the term 'publics' offers a description of these phenomena that is both empirically more adequate and theoretically richer. Following this, I want to draw on Gabriel Tarde's work to better understand how value is actually produced in these processes. Finally, I want to speculate on how such value-creating publics create *values* also in the non-economic, ethical sense of the term, and how such a new ethics of consumer publics can become an 'original part', what in the *Magna Moralia* Aristotle calls a *méros kai archè* – of a new possible politics. But first, let us look a bit more closely at the phenomenon of productive consumption.

## Productive consumption

Since the 1970s theoretical attention to the productive elements of consumer action has passed from cultural studies into marketing and what is now known as Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). While the

phenomenon of 'productive consumption' is much older, dating back to the very origins of modern consumer society, and possibly even further (Sassatelli, 2007), theoretical attention to this phenomenon has developed, in part, as a result of its real emergence. Indeed, the last four decades, roughly coinciding with the rise of an 'information society', have seen a shift in the very nature of consumer culture. To put it very bluntly: up until the 1960s, consumer goods were principally, although not exclusively, used to signify and demarcate established social identities. Since the 1960s they have increasingly been used by an ever broader strata of the population to create and develop such identities (Arvidsson, 2006: 17-40). This has given the circulation of consumer goods a necessarily productive dimension. On a more empirical level, this large-scale shift can be said to have been driven by three interconnected tendencies.

*First*, the very development of consumer society has resulted in a diffusion of consumer goods that can be used productively. In particular, through the diffusion of technologies for cultural production (like video and digital cameras, and, later, editing software) the costs of cultural production have greatly reduced, enabling a wider range of people to take part in these activities. *Second*, the mediatization of consumer goods and social relations in general has greatly enhanced the 'signifying power' of consumer goods. By being inserted in a global media circuit, a branded item can condense meanings in new and highly efficient ways (Lash and Lury, 2006). At the same time, the diffusion of information and communication technologies has greatly reduced the costs of association, making it easier for enthusiastic consumers to find each other and collaborate in the production of immaterial as well as, increasingly, material wealth. *Finally*, with higher levels of education combined with higher levels of graduate unemployment, in particular among arts and humanities, graduates have combined to create a 'cognitive surplus' (Shirky, 2010) of people who have the skill and time to undertake new forms of collaborative productive activities where the line between consumption and production is blurred (for example, in urban creative 'scenes') (Lloyd, 2006).

What consumers produce is largely limited to the immaterial or informational content of commodities (although tendencies like Open Design and Open Manufacturing point at the possibility of organizing the *material* production of goods in similar ways, see Carson, 2010). It is the informational value of commodities that changes and is elaborated as they circulate through a wide range of diverse practices, acquire different meanings and get associated with distinct lifestyles and identities. Consumer researchers have generally left the precise nature of this process of immaterial production untouched. However, management and organizational theorists, along with post-autonomist Marxists, have spent quite some effort on identifying the nature of organization of the

highly similar processes in which information (or knowledge) is created, or creatively elaborated, as it circulates in knowledge intensive organizations (Heckscher and Adler, 2006; Lazzarato, 1997). They have identified four chief characteristics of what some of them define as a new 'informational' mode of production particular to the 'knowledge economy' (Adler, 2001), or to 'cognitive capitalism' (Moulier-Boutang, 2002). Let us try to apply those insights to processes of productive consumption.

*First*, such practices generally unfold beyond the direct control of markets and hierarchies. Instead, they take the form of diffuse forms of collaboration that involve a wide diversity of different actors that belong to different organizations, or as in the case of most consumers, to no organizations at all. *Second*, these productive practices are based on a blurring of consumption and production in the sense that the use or enjoyment of the consumer products around which they are organized generally depends on or is enhanced by some form of productive contribution (for example, adding to the ongoing narrative of a World of Warcraft guild or suggesting innovative ways to use consumer products). *Third*, these practices are generally self-organized, and participants play an important role in developing organizational forms in relation to the changing requirements of the situation at hand. As has been identified by a number of studies on collaborative networks of Open or Free software production (O'Mahony and Ferraro, 2007), as well as 'brand communities' or 'consumer tribes' of various kinds (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Cova, et al., 2007), this means that participants engage in a large amount of deliberation where goals, aims and productive organization are decided on as a matter of course. Of course, to the extent that such productive networks are initiated and maintained by corporations, this element of bottom-up deliberation clashes with and confronts top-down attempts at corporate control, contributing to perceptions, on the part of management, of these practices as evasive and uncontrollable (Fisher and Smith, 2011; Gabriel and Lang, 1995).

*Fourth and finally*, productive processes in these collaborative networks principally deploy common resources, like the common knowledge available to members of an Open Source software network, or the common culture that has consolidated around a brand and its uses. These processes are collaborative in the sense that even though individual consumers can add to, reinvent and re-elaborate the meaning and value of consumer goods individually, value is generally understood to have been created when such innovations are added to a pool of common resources that can subsequently feed into the creativity and elaboration of others. It is the common pursuit of a particular goal, be this 'creativity' in a team of knowledge workers or the greatness of the Apple brand, for example, which defines the value of contributions. In other words, value is related not to individual effort *per se*, but to the comprehensive contribution that

such an effort makes to the ‘circulation of the common’, to use Nick Dyer-Witheford’s (2009) phrase.

Such ‘value’ shows no linear relation to the ‘labor time’ that an individual user puts in (Fuchs, 2010). In other words, it is not the time you spend practicing on your guitar that determines whether your song will be a hit! This also means that the tangible outcome of these productive practices (e.g. lines of code, pages of fan fiction, stylistic innovation in brand use) are put back into the common domain and as such remain without any monetary value. Consequently, and this has baffled many observers, there is no discernible link between concrete productive participations and the expectation of monetary gain (Lerner and Tirole, 2002). This has led many observers, coming from widely different perspectives, to suggest that such collaborative practices are the harbingers of a new altruistic mode of production where monetary rewards, and by implication traditional conceptions of economic rationality, no longer apply (e.g. Barbrook, 1998; Benkler, 2011; Adler, 2001).

I believe that this is something of a premature conclusion. It is definitely possible to reconstruct an economic rationality around participation in practices of collaborative production. But it is a different rationality than that proposed by neoclassical economics. I will suggest that it is better understood as a civic, or ethical, rationality in which motives of economic gain and motives that have to do with the excellence of civic action tend to coincide, or at least approach one another. In the last section of this article I will elaborate further on how I think that is happening. But first, let me address the question of how these practices should be conceived of conceptually.

## Publics

The popularity of communities on the Internet has captured the attention of marketing professionals. Indeed, the word ‘community’ seems poised to overtake ‘relationship’ as that new marketing buzz-word. So-called ‘community brands’ like the Geocities Web site (‘home’ of more than three million community members ‘living’ in 41 ‘neighborhoods’) provide communication media for hundreds and thousands of individuals who share common interests. (McWilliam, 2000: 43)

This prophecy, taken from one of the pioneering articles to launch the concept of ‘communities’ as a new way for marketers to conceive of and address the phenomenon of productive consumer action, was certainly right in predicting the success of this buzzword. (The Google Ngram Viewer shows how the frequency of the term ‘brand community’ in the English language books scanned by Google increased fourfold between 2000 and 2008). At the same time the frequent use of quotation marks seems to signal a certain hesitation about the semantic

adequacy of this term. Clearly, phenomena like the now defunct Geocities web space with its 'more than three million members' are not to be understood as communities, at least not in anything that resembles the significance that the term originally held in social theory (not to speak of Facebook or YouTube that are most definitely *not* communities).

In social theory, the term 'community' denotes a social formation marked by dense webs of interpersonal interaction and a durable attachment to a shared territory or, at least, identity. It is certainly possible to find collective practices of productive consumption that take the form of communities. Consumer research has arguably come to privilege the study of such practices, as a result of its embrace of ethnography or 'netnography' (Kozinets, 2010) as a methodological strategy. Moreover, it might be true that up until a decade ago the term 'community' offered a more reasonable description of how consumers came together to create meaning and value around brands (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), how people shared and co-created information online (for example, in virtual communities, see Rheingold, 1993) and how knowledge workers worked together in collaborative communities, whether inside companies or in peer-to-peer networks. But this term is no longer particularly representative of how collaborative processes of consumption/production function today. This is so for principally three reasons.

First, and at a very basic level, there has been a shift in consumer culture from a reproductive to a productive phase, where consumers are expected to make active use of commodities in creating individual life-style statements, something that sociologists have identified as a key feature of our times ever since the bygone days of 'postmodernity' (Featherstone, 1991). Such a shift implies, per definition, that productive consumer practices have become an ordinary pursuit for ordinary people. While theorists of 'the postmodern' might have exaggerated the representativeness of this tendency back in the 1980s, recent decades have produced a number of detailed studies that clearly show that such practices of productive consumption has become part of the everyday business of, at least, the 'New Class' of knowledge workers (for an overview see Arvidsson, 2006). To put it simply, you do not need to be a member of a 'community' to engage in productive consumption; in fact, you are expected to do this, at some level of activity, as part of your normal life course.

Naturally this productivity of consumption has been aided by the mediatization of consumer culture, global consumer culture and global brands, the flourishing DIY culture aided by a plethora of television chefs and reality shows dedicated to home decoration, and, of course, by the diffusion of internet connectivity. The internet, and in particular social media, have both greatly extended the number

of people who participate in productive consumer practices and the ways in which they participate. If, in the 1990s, the principal way of participating in and creating value for a brand consisted in taking part in forums, mailing lists and other participatory media that were biased to interpersonal communication, it is far more common for consumers today to create value for a brand by re-tweeting its communication of simply 'liking' its viral communications on Facebook. There is accumulating evidence that most forms of online consumer action involve such looser and more transitory forms of engagements with brands and products: posting once or twice in a blog, looking up an online forum on motherhood to ask a question about a branded product and then never coming back again, and so on (for an overview see Colleoni, 2012)

Moreover, while marketing approaches tended previously to focus on the crucial role played by a small community of influencers in creating and diffusing buzz and opinion, recent approaches that rely on large amount of digital data have instead pointed to the role of a large mass of loosely connected individuals. Watts and Dodds, for example, suggest that information diffusion is driven 'not by *influentials* but by a critical mass of easily influenced individuals' (Watts and Dodds, 2007: 441; see also Brown and Reingen, 1987). Such 'accidental influencers', as they call them, are not connected to each other by strong webs of interpersonal interaction, but by weaker forms of mediated association, like re-tweeting a message. Consequently, marketing strategies aim at discovering and promoting the ability of such loosely-associated individuals to create buzz in a coordinated way (Hansen et al., 2011), and to enhance the 'network value' of such associations (Domingos and Richardson, 2011; Cha, et al. 2010). Such loose and fragmented forms of attention are difficult to subsume under the term 'community' because they do not involve sustained relations of interpersonal interaction with other members. There is also accumulating evidence that when such direct forms of interaction do occur, 'membership' is highly transitory. For example, only 58 per cent of those who posted in a usenet group subsequently repost, and World of Warcraft guilds replace, on average, 25 per cent of their members per month (Arguello et al., 2006; Ducheneaut, et al. 2005).

Second, to create such wide and loose forms of association among consumers also seems to be the aim of contemporary brand management. Asian brands, for example, aim to create a diffuse sensation of imagined belonging to an Asian identity that is difficult to localize, that thus fosters

new kinds of social relations, enabling connections between people who may have never seen each other yet come to a shared sense of moral responsibility towards the brand and the community to which they perceive themselves as belonging'. (Cayla and Eckhardt, 2008: 216)

In a similar vein, both Lury (2004) and Arvidsson (2006), along with a long list of marketing practitioners, have pointed out how contemporary brand management aims at creating affective connections among consumers. But affective connections do not presuppose or direct interaction. Rather, as Gabriel Tarde (1989[1901]) has pointed out, affective connections depend on the media to foster a 'mental union', a *communio mentale*, among participants to a public without them needing to actually interact with each other, as when a cinema audience is grasped by a common affective intensity, or when the 49 million fans of the Korean pop band *Super Junior* gasp in unison as the lead singer shakes his hips (Shim, 2006; Kittler, 1990). As recent theories of brand management – both critical and practitioner-oriented – suggest, it is precisely in the formation of such disembodied affective associations that value creation occurs (for an overview see Colleoni, 2012). It is of course possible to call such forms of loose association 'communities' (imagined communities, perhaps, as theorized by Anderson, 1983 and Cohen, 1985), but there already exists another social science term for this: 'community without propinquity' (Calhoun, 1998; Weber, 1963). Incidentally, this term also describes how information is created and re-elaborated as it circulated. The term that I want to use is 'publics'.

Gabriel Tarde already drew attention to the social and economic salience of publics in 1901. A public is a mediated association amongst strangers who are united by an affective intensity that is directed towards a common thing (a brand, a celebrity, a news story), however momentarily. Publics are thus weaker forms of association than communities, and participation in a public might be less enduring; one is part of a public while reading the newspaper or while clicking on the 'like' button of Coca Cola's Facebook page. The effects of such participation on identity might be much more transitory and, above all, weaker. Along with these socio-psychological features, publics also designate a different structure of communication. A community is based on direct interaction among its members. While such forms of direct interaction might exist among members of a public as well, what makes them members is not their interaction with each other as such but their common devotion to the thing in common that constitutes the public, the *communio mentale* that they form around it (Tarde, 1989). This *thing* can consist in a common focus of attention, as when a theatre public goes silent as the curtain opens. It can also consist in something more substantial, like a devotion to a common cause such as a working class public held together by a shared political identity. Publics are held together by what moral philosopher Charles Taylor calls a social imaginary, that confers an experience of community among members of a public, however weak (e.g. 'we are the citizens of France', 'we are the true wine connoisseurs', 'we defend open software against corporate profit motives') (Taylor, 2004).

This absence of direct interaction does not necessarily mean that publics are orchestrated from the top down. Some publics might be, in particular those that rely on centralized mass communication. But, as Chris Kelty (2008) and others have suggested, the kinds of publics that develop with digital media tend to be what he calls 'recursive publics'. That is, they are united by a common social imaginary that is, in turn, created and re-elaborated by the members themselves. Such recursive publics are self-organized entities. They are constituted – tautologically – by their ability to organize and maintain the particular imaginary that makes them into publics. As Michael Warner (2002: 56) puts it, 'a public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse', that is, by the circulation of utterances (in some form or another) that always already understand themselves as addressing the particular public that they are indeed addressing (and the cration of such 'circulation of discourse', and not of tightly-knit communities, was precisely what Arjun Appaduari (1986) already described as the cultural effects of the global circulation of commodities). Of course, in the case of consumer publics the degree of autonomy and self-determination naturally depends on the success with which corporate actors are able to control and orchestrate the social imaginary that unites them. However, the frequency with which marketing discourse addresses consumer publics as ungovernable, chaotic or uncontrollable suggests that such autonomy is difficult to completely eradicate (Zwick et al., 2008).

In any case, as a social form, publics suggest a different modality of co-creation than a community. Simply put, in a community members co-create by cooperating with each other directly. While such forms of co-creation might be a feature of consumer publics, the main modality of creation is different. In a public, the ideal-typical way of co-creating consists in individual, or sub-group, appropriations and re-elaborations of common resources that are subsequently put back into the common domain. Creation in publics is thus not an interpersonal as much as it is a *common* pursuit, uniting a multitude of local and small-scale elaborations that might occur independently of each other, around a common interest or goal. To my mind this seems much more logical as a description of how productive consumption works, and much more in line with existing empirical research. It is also the model of co-creation that is emerging in studies of Free Software and 'large scale collaborative creativity among knowledge workers' (Kelty, 2008; Adler and Chen, 2011).

While some consumers might form communities around, say, the Apple brand, the co-creation of a valuable Apple brand equity is not the effect of all Apple consumers co-operating directly with each other, but of the ability of the Apple platform to connect individual or small-scale community-based forms of cooperation into a common public united around a common social imaginary. It

was precisely this ability to foster an experience of communality in the absence of community that Bernard Cova (1997) pointed to with his concept of the 'linking value' of commodities. I would suggest that such communality without community is a core feature of contemporary consumer culture, and it also a core feature of publics, as Gabriel Tarde described them. So, at a first level, publics seem to offer a more empirically adequate description of the social forms in which contemporary productive consumption takes place, at least in its manifestation as a mass phenomenon. But the concept of publics also allows us to think through the issue of value creation in more innovative ways.

## Value (1)

Another conceptual advantage of the term 'publics' is that while 'communities' are classically understood to reproduce a traditional value structure, publics create new values, in the form of 'buzz', reputation and opinion. This value-creating function was one of the reasons that led Gabriel Tarde (1989[1901]) to propose that publics be taken as the modern form of social organization *par excellence*. In this *Psychologie economique* (Tarde, 1902, cf. Hughes, 1961, Latour, 2010), Tarde also suggested that the more the modern economy took the form of a consumer economy, where the commodities produced and the needs catered to were different from those supported by existing traditions, and where public communication was ever more mediatized, this value creating function of publics would play an even greater economic role. Indeed, publics are the 'space' where modern consumer needs are created. But publics produce more than needs. Indeed, in the *Psychologie economique*, Tarde argued that the economic value of modern consumer goods depend to no small degree on the perceptions of their 'truty, beauty and utility' that public communication could sustain. In other words, in a mediated consumer economy, value is not supported by established traditions, nor can it always be arrived at through rational calculation. Instead value is conventional, it is supported by shared public perceptions. And, conversely, the ability of publics to erect and support such conventions thus plays a crucial economic role.

In order to understand how publics can sustain such value conventions we need to depart from a slightly different question. How do members of a public feel that they have something in common – a communality – even if they do not interact with each other, even if there is no community? The answer to this question rests with the 'social imaginary' that keeps the public together, and is able to confer an 'experience' of communality on its members. It is worth noting again that this is a matter of experience, rather than 'reality' (if such a distinction is permissible). In more precise terms, the thing that the community has in

common is *real*, in the sense that it is supported by actually existing social relations that really work as foundations of trust and mutual support. But the experience of communion that the public fosters is *virtual*: it is a matter of an experience, created by a sense of affective proximity to the goals or aims of the public. While this virtual communality might sometimes be actualized, as when the public takes to the street and becomes a crowd, this need not necessarily happen for the experience to 'work', nor do such 'actualizations' need to endure. The public might as well evaporate once the common affective intensity that keeps it together can no longer be sustained. The public is constituted and held together by such a common affective intensity. I call this affective intensity its 'ethos'.

The original, archaic meaning of ethos was something like 'dwelling' or 'habitat'. Later this term became central to the Aristotelian tradition where it has come to mean something like 'character' or 'custom', in two interconnected meanings of those terms. In the first rhetorical sense, *ethos* denotes the emotional character of a speaker that allows him or her to bond with his or her audience and affect their interpretation of what he or she says in a particular way. That is, a public endowed with a particular ethos will interpret the world (slightly) differently. It might, for example, conceive of Apple products as so superior that it is worth spending a rainy night queuing outside an Apple store when the new iPad is launched. In the contemporary economy a public ethos, in the aesthetic sense of that term- as a convention that allows an interpretation- plays a central role in supporting the value of contemporary brands. In their current phase of development, brands have become more than mere symbols, they have become objectifications of a particular way of living with commodities, a particular ethos that permeates relations between people and goods, and between people and other people insofar as these relations are mediated by goods (Arvidsson, 2006; Lury, 2004; Willmott, 2010). The ethos that a public is able to create and maintain support around a brand supports the ability of a brand to provide a particular consumer experience. This way the public ethos becomes a central component of the use value of brands.

But this ethos has also acquired an important function in supporting the monetary exchange value of brands. In part, this happens in consumer markets, where the different interpretation of value that such an ethos supports can justify large price differences among functionally and aesthetically similar goods. However, the role of such value conventions is arguably most important in financial markets. Indeed, brands are primarily to be understood as financial assets: the combined consequence of the financialization of value and the socialization of production that have marked the development of an information economy is the distancing of the financial value of assets ever further from what

can be accounted for by established valuation systems. In accounting parlance, this difference has acquired the (somewhat inadequate) term 'intangible' values. Travelling under a host of different names, like knowledge capital, social capital, reputation, innovation and so on, intangible assets represent that part of market valuations that cannot be rationally reconstructed from within established accounting frameworks.

This is of course a truth that requires some modification. First, established accounting frameworks have changed to some degree to take account of and rationalize such intangible assets. Second, there is a plethora of methods and strategies that propose frames to permit such rationalization. But, as Salinas and Ambler (2009) suggest, the very variety of the methods and approaches used are themselves an indication that no common rationality prevails. Instead, as recent economic sociology has suggested, the value of such intangible assets are decided when asset valuers interpret, deliberate over and debate various aspects of the performance of companies. Value is then established when analysts arrive at a common frame of interpretation.

For example, the value of Amazon.com changes substantially if it is interpreted as a dot-com company or as a bookseller (Beunza and Garud, 2004). There is growing evidence that the ethos that can be sustained by publics is acquiring a greater influence on the ways in which such interpretative conventions are elaborated. In part this is so because instruments of brand valuation are making increasing use of, at a variety of levels, measurements of the strength and direction of affective investments in brands as core parameters in estimating their value (Lury and Moore, 2010). In addition, the arrival of social media has permitted a new objectification of the affective investments on which such an ethos is grounded. Expressions of affective attachments in social media can be mined and transformed into reputational and sentiment data that can quite easily be included in the information environments where asset valuers operate. Indeed, companies like *General Sentiment* or *EthicalQuote* offer visualizations of social media-based sentiment data as part of information packages directed at brand managers, asset valuers and financial analysts (Arvidsson and Colleoni, 2012). Further, a number of studies have established that public reputation is acquiring an ever more direct effect on the value and performance of companies along a wide range of horizons that go from stock market performance via sales to the ability to innovate or attract talented employees (Orlitsky and Benjamin, 2001).

In short, among asset valuers, at a wide variety of levels, there seems to be an emerging awareness of the Tardian connection between the monetary value of assets and the conventions of their 'truth, beauty and utility' that can be

sustained by consumer (and other) publics. The ability to ‘make’ a public sustain such a perception, through a common affective intensity, is acquiring a concrete role as an important determinant of monetary value in the information economy.

## Value (2)

The term *ethos* also has a second meaning. As used in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, *ethos* means something like ‘custom’, a particular set of expectations as to the behaviour of a virtuous person (or citizen). In this sense a virtuous character (or excellent character) – *ethiké areté* – denotes a set of predispositions that enables a person to ‘live well’ with others. The *ethos* of a public also generally contains a notion of what such ‘virtue’ consists.

Sometimes this can be a matter of an explicit set of common values, as in the public of animal rights activists. Sometimes it consists in a looser and less articulate ethical disposition, as when Apple users somehow feel that their favoured brand is superior to others, in a moral sense, without them being able, perhaps, to explain exactly how. Sometimes this *ethos* can be materialized in explicit codes of conduct, as when a branded corporate organization seeks to make certain values transpire all through its value chain, or when members of a brand community put up explicit standards for judging other members’ conduct (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Sometimes the *ethos* contains a strong aversion to clearly identified enemies and prescribe strong expectations about the lifestyle of members, as when members of Free Software publics are expected to resent proprietary software and have nothing to do with Microsoft.

In any case, the *ethos* that keeps a public together, and installs communality in the absence of community also generally contains a set of standards and expectations that allow members of that public to make judgements as to the value of the conduct and character of other members, or other publics. Again, such expectations can be strong or weak, implicit or explicit. Publics of Free Software developers have strong expectations as to the conduct of their members which are rendered explicit in manifestos, constitutions and other textual products where values are directly spelled out. Corporate brands prosper as long as the explicit value statements that they set for themselves are mirrored in the judgments that their stakeholders make as to their actual practice. Brand ‘communities’ have weaker expectations that are sometimes never spelled out – but try coming to a Harley Davidson reunion on your Japanese motorcycle!

The existence of an *ethos* in this second sense of ‘custom’ means that publics have values. As such, they are able to confer value judgements on the conduct of

their members (as well as on the conduct of other actors). A growing literature on brand communities, urban creative scenes and Free or Open production networks shows that members are acutely aware of the virtues and vices of the conduct of other members, and quite quick to make their judgements known (for an overview see Arvidsson & Peitersen, 2013). What is judged is generally not only or even primarily technical competence. Even in highly specialized publics, like those of Open Source software developers, people are judged not only for their ability to write 'beautiful code' but also for their ability to solve conflicts, socialize new members, and contribute to the cause of the public in general. Such non-technical judgments are even more important in publics that require less in terms of technical brilliance, like brand communities or publics of people devoted to a common erotic kink, where the conduct and virtue of individual members often becomes the main determinant of their standing in the eyes of others. Indeed, in an early study Don Slater showed that 'sex pic traders on IRC' – a by now presumably defunct breed - maintained what he called a 'moral economy' in which they constantly judged the conduct of each other both in terms of their propensity to 'leech', and in terms of the tone of discussion that individual members engaged in (Slater, 1998). Generally, such judgments are conferred on individual members as reputation. Indeed, throughout the history of modern philosophy reputation has always been understood as part of a person's public existence, of his existence as a member of a public (Brennan and Pettit, 2004). As such, public reputation has a number of particular characteristics.

First, as opposed to trust, reputation does not presuppose the intimacy of interaction. On the contrary, reputation can be conferred on strangers on the basis of limited public information about their behaviour and character. We do not need to know Jamie Oliver to know he is someone who can not only cook, but is also socially-engaged in virtuous ways. Excessive intimacy can often destroy a person's reputation, as when a politician's love life is inappropriately exposed. Reputation is the form that social capital takes among strangers.

Second, a person's reputation is an abstraction of a multitude of value judgments conferred on him or her by a large number of actors who may depart from diverse value judgements. Once again, the reputation of Jamie Oliver presumably depends on judgements as to his conduct and virtue performed by people who are meat-eaters as well as vegans. This means that publics possess some mechanism that is able to abstract the concrete value judgements that particular members express, and transform these into comparable expressions of a common 'substance' or 'general equivalent' that expresses the comprehensive judgement of the public itself. In Bourdieuan terms, the field has its own 'laws' of value (or distinction) that enable the conversion of concrete value judgements

into standards that have general validity. For Bourdieu (1979), these mechanisms remained hidden and mysterious, to be reconstructed through minute empirical research. In many publics, at least those which use online media, they can be spelled out quite explicitly in the form of the algorithms that underpin value metrics used by, for example, publics of software developers.

Third, insofar as reputation builds not only on technical brilliance, but also on the comprehensive contribution that a member is able to give to the cause of a public, then his or her reputation represents an abstraction of the collective judgement as to the value of his or her overall contribution to the common pursuit to which the public is devoted. In this way, reputation is the abstract form that value takes in an economy of commons.

Once a person has acquired a reputation, this can be realized in different ways. First, in creative scenes, reputation is often directly monetized. It is the reputational status of an actor that largely determines the monetary value of his work. This is true for artists, musicians and DJs, as well as, increasingly, freelance knowledge workers and mobile corporate managers (Currid, 2007; Martin, 2005). Second, reputation can be used as social capital. The higher a person's reputation, the easier it is for him or her to initiate processes, recruit talented co-workers, or start new projects. Finally, reputation can enhance the enjoyment of participation. If one is conceived of as a cool guy it is more fun to go to the Star Trek fair. However reputation is realized, the prospect of accumulating reputation constitutes a motivation for participation in productive publics. Whatever my other reasons for participating are, the fact I can acquire a reputation that I can subsequently enjoy in many different ways makes participation in productive publics quite compatible with classic notions of economic rationality. In other words, if we think of productive consumption as happening in publics, we can also find a way to explain why people participate in such practices that is perfectly in line with established models of economic action.

The notion that productive publics in general are coordinated by a new kind of reputation economy is presently being consolidated by a wide range of empirical studies that analyze highly diverse practices. In addition, actual developments that point towards the objectification of reputation and the integration of such objectified measurements in a number of value decisions – on the micro as well as macro level – point towards the possibility that such a reputation economy is presently undergoing a process of rationalization. For example, many recent qualitative studies point to how knowledge workers consistently cultivate an online reputation to enhance the monetary value of their work and further their careers more generally (Hearn, 2008; Clegg, 2011), and often use objective

measurements of such reputational capital, like Klout status, in order to justify the fees that they charge (Marwick, et al., 2010). It should be noted that most of the empirical evidence derives from more 'professional' contexts, like urban creative scenes (Currid, 2007), publics of freelance workers (Clegg, 2011) or open source developers (O'Neil, 2009).

It seems reasonable to suggest that as productive consumption enters into a normal part of the life conduct of knowledge workers, and in particular for the younger generations of future knowledge workers who are now the most passionate self-branders on social media platforms (Marwick and Boyd, 2010), a reputation for excellence in such practices of productive consumption becomes part of the social capital that knowledge workers (and others too, perhaps) can deploy. To put it in Bourdieuan terms: insofar as 'distinction' comes to depend not primarily on the ability to replicate established consumption norms, but on the ability to consume productively and 'creatively' (Brooks, 2001), and insofar as consumption as such counts ever more as a field in which overall character is defined, it is reasonable to expect that reputation acquired through participation in productive consumer publics becomes all the more significant in the 'general economy of capital' in which social resources and opportunities are distributed. What is new is not that reputation per se becomes important to economic success. This mechanism has already been identified by sociologists like Weber (1948), Parsons (1939) and Bourdieu (1979). Rather, what is new is that the field in which such reputation is acquired shifts from the religious 'sect' or the profession to the productive consumer public. Consequently, participation in such productive consumer publics becomes in part motivated by the ability to accumulate reputational capital that can be realized in other walks of life.

## **Action and ethics**

Until quite recently, the relation between consumption and ethics has been conceived in largely two ways. First there is the liberal view that suggests that consumers express their exogenous preferences, including ethical preferences, via their consumer choices. In this sense, consumption is understood as one way among many others in which values can be expressed, one of many 'voice' options that modern citizens can choose from. The values actually expressed here are understood to originate from the private concerns of individuals. Second, there is the critical theory perspective, whereby consumption and consumer society is understood to be diametrically opposed to the very possibility of ethics. This view is perhaps best expressed by Zygmunt Bauman, who in his lecture entitled 'Does ethics have a chance in a world of consumers?' responded with a

distinct 'no'. This is because, in a consumer society, the sense of communality necessary for ethics to thrive

has been split into a multitude of individual and personal, strikingly similar but decidedly not complementary portmanteaus. Each one is made to the measure of consumers' bliss – meant, like all consumer joys, for utterly individual, lonely enjoyment even when relished in company'. (2008: 28)

But the phenomenon of consumer publics seems to indicate another possibility, in line with recent empirical research on ethical or socially responsible consumer practices (Barnett et al. 2005; Devinney et al., 2010; Marres, 2011): that consumer action can actually work as a source of ethics, and not just as a reflection (or negation) of ethical perspectives that have emerged elsewhere.

Such a different conception of ethics also builds on a different conception of consumer practice. Once again, consumption has traditionally been conceived of as a passive activity, the 'end' of the production process in which values are destroyed, unfolding in a 'consumer's society' where human life has been incarcerated in an iron cage made up of administered and mass-produced needs (Arendt, 1958: 126-135). In response to the growing activity of consumers and the increasing inclusion of that activity within the capitalist valorization process, some recent social theory has instead suggested that the activity of consumption be subsumed under the term 'labour' (Arvidsson, 2006; Fuchs, 2010). I think this operation is misleading for, principally, two reasons. First, from an economic point of view, the ways in which consumer practice adds value to capital are different from those traditionally associated with the ability of labour to create surplus value in the capitalist economy (Arvidsson and Colleoni, 2011). Second, and more important for our purposes, the experience of productive consumption is different from that classically associated with labour.

To put it in Arendt's terms: the labour of the slave or of the industrial worker is different from the 'work' of the craftsman in that it is alienated from the end product and only obeys the imposed orders and directions of someone else (i.e. the capitalist, the *pater familias*). Labour is thus a human productive activity that is alienated and commanded (Arendt, 1958: 79; Sennett, 2008). But the productive activity of consumers is neither alienated nor is it commanded. It is undertaken freely out of 'passion for' (or 'affective proximity' to) the cause to which it is dedicated. In this way the activity of consumers is more similar to what Arendt calls 'action'; that is, the creative activities that are freely undertaken by actors in the public domain. Action is immediately related to ethics in the sense that, through it, human beings create a common world (a *polis*) that enables them to live together.

Consumers who come together in publics act together to form common horizon of values that, in turn, determine the direction of their passions and engagements. And those common value horizons, those *ethoi*, last as long as they are, in turn, able to involve and render passionate new and existing actors. This is true for traditional brand ‘communities’, in the face of which brand managers perceive that they are losing the power to determine what the ‘values’ of a brand should be, and it is also true in relation to the increasingly well documented power of looser forms of public opinion to set the values that are attributed to consumer brands and that determine perceptions of corporate social responsibility. Moreover, it is true for more ‘political’ consumer publics like the San Francisco-based ‘plastic pollution coalition’, a public consisting of a range of diverse actors, some consumers, some NGOs, some companies, who together to invent and create a new moral and political point of view from which to criticize and act on the problem of plastic ocean pollution (see <http://plasticpollutioncoalition.org/>) In this sense, it seems that consumer publics could act as the ‘value communities’ that modern moral philosophers, starting with Alastair MacIntyre (1981), have understood to be disappearing in modern society, taking with them the very possibility of a coherent discourse on ethics.

What is more, the ethics of consumer publics entails the coming together of a multitude of points of view, representing the multitude of orders of worth (Stark, 2009) that prevail in contemporary society, and their fusion into one – however temporary – value construct that enable a value judgement to take place, however momentarily. In this way, publics might offer a solution to the crippling relativism that plagues ‘post-modern ethics’ (Bauman, 1993; Badiou, 2001). At the same time, however, the universal that publics arrive at is not metaphysically grounded, nor even ‘transcendent’ in any way (not even ‘quasi-transcendent’, Habermas, 1984; 1987). It is rather a mobile, temporary universal, which just like the universal of market prices represents nothing but the dynamics of the new objectified sentiment (or ‘General Sentiment’, Arvidsson, 2011) that can be abstracted from the many minute value judgements that members of singular publics engage in. In this way, networked consumer publics can potentially offer a new conception of value by means of which the worth of action might be judged.

Consumer publics are also political spaces, or at least they might represent the beginning of a new politics concerned with the direct management of common resources. Like the communities that Elinor Ostrom (1990) studied in her *Governing the commons*, publics involve participants in a series of engagements and deliberations – frequently highly conflicting – in which members build the norms, rules, institutions and organizational forms, including definition of ends

and aims, that enable the public to keep operating productively and further the cause that it has in common. Publics are thus political in the classic Aristotelian sense of constructing and caring for the cause in common, the *polis*, but, contrary to the communities that Ostrom studied, they can do this without the requirement of physical co-presence, binding strong ties or 'hot' intimacy. This way, publics can constitute an institutional form for government of the global immaterial commons, like the 'digital commons' that are growing ever more central in the information society.

Both the ethical and the political aspects of consumer publics are directly linked to the creation of economic wealth. The creation of wealth, whether this be a free computer operating system, a strong brand identity that can be capitalized on as financial equity, or social wealth in the form of the ability of a public like the US food movement to contribute to addressing social concerns (or some combination of the three) is also immediately political in the sense that the successful pursuit of such wealth presupposes the successful deliberative administration of a common production process. Similarly, this process of wealth creation is impossible to separate from the ethical practice of creating common values that is what unites publics in the first place. Publics produce, deliberate and evaluate at the same time. Publics are thus manifestations of the directly political nature of 'immaterial labor' or 'knowledge work' that has constituted something of a common discovery of recent managerial theory on the one hand (Heckscher and Adler, 2006) and Italian post-Autonomist thought on the other (Virno, 2004). They represent a new institutional form in which the spheres of economics, ethics and politics, tragically separated in the modernization process, come together in forms of public action (Arendt, 1958). That is, publics might offer us a possible way of imagining both a new politicization of the economy and a new paradigm of value that is both ethical and economic at the same time.

Indeed, from the point of view of political economy, publics constitute a possible way of running an economy of commons. When, as Marx prophesized, the creation of value will rely more on common resources (or 'general intellect') than on the direct exploitation of labour time, then the 'law of value' will explode from within and 'exchange value will no longer be the measure of use value' (Marx, 1973: 705-707). This, Antonio Negri (1999) has suggested, will open up for the 'affective self-valorization of the multitude as the main principle according to which values are set. Publics, I suggest, are the institutional form in which this 'affective self-valorization of the multitude' might take place. The value form that they articulate is highly compatible with an economy of commons in that economic value comes to depend directly on a diffuse perception of ethical virtue, or in other words, the economic value of a person or of a public itself comes to depend directly on how its overall contribution to the commons is evaluated by a

multitude of actors that are affectively proximate to and have an interest in that commons. In this sense, publics and the 'ethical economy' (Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2013) represent a new possibility to let a wider plurality of 'voices' have a say in the elaboration of economic values (Couldry, 2010).

Possibility is, of course, a key term here, because in their present state, consumer publics remain subsumed and dominated by a media system in which power is increasingly concentrated among a select handful of actors and in which large corporations maintain disproportionate communicative power (Wu, 2011). This obviously limits the political and ethical potential of consumer publics. This condition also keeps the productive processes that unfold in consumer publics subsumed under an inadequate and empty notion of 'intangible value' that in itself can be understood as part of a neoliberal reaction to the growing socialization of production that marks the information economy (Arvidsson and Colleoni, 2012). But the empirical phenomenon of consumer publics points towards a different kind of value, one which is closer to the vitalist tradition of Tarde and Simmel than to Marx. Marxists have rightly criticized this tradition for its lack of attention to the ways in which value and its measure are politically constituted (Lukacs, 1971). I would suggest that attention to precisely such a politics of measure is of key importance in our present context: the construction and design of a new public sphere, with new kinds of devices and spaces that can enable value to emerge in a new way is, I think, a key ingredient of a progressive politics that tries to unlock the economic, political and ethical potential of productive publics in ways that point beyond the crumbling neoliberal edifice.

In 1996, Habermas suggested that since we no longer believe in the doctrine of natural law, or in legal positivism, jurisprudence could be opened up to processes of public deliberation. Analogously, today we no longer believe in the labour theory of value, we no longer believe in the rational market hypothesis and we have begun to have serious doubts about the notion of 'intangible value' as it is presently defined in business discourse. But, like Habermas, we sense that the setting of economic value could be opened up to wider forms of deliberation. I suggest that publics and the reputation economies that they enact can constitute a possible way of achieving this.

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@inproceedings{Arvidsson2013ThePO, title={The potential of consumer publics}, author={Adam Arvidsson}, year={2013} }. Adam Arvidsson. We are used to thinking of consumption as a private affair. Social theory and economics have classically understood the formation of the needs and desires that drive consumer action as something that occurs outside of the public domain; beyond the space of deliberation, driven by "the stomach or the fancy"™ as Marx put it. And with the rise of a consumer society, such needs and desires have become increasingly administered, subject to techno-scientific discipline. Consumer products organizations can leverage artificial intelligence solutions to improve efficiencies, personalize offerings, and achieve consumer delight. Figure 1 explores several potential use cases of AI that are applicable to the consumer products industry. They are arranged based on the main categories associated with cognitive technologies: robotic process automation, language technologies, machine learning, and computer vision. Download Share.