**mgr Monika Krzeszewska**

Uniwersytet Szczeciński

nr albumu: 1759

# DOCTORAL DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

### Title: Political activity of alter-globalist movements towards consumptionism

The rationale of the present doctoral dissertation is to analyse the phenomena accompanying modern global changes, with the key research problem at presenting the phenomenon of mass consumptionism, which has laid the ground for new dimensions to political civilisation conflict. Analysis of research material revealed that objection towards the tendencies entailed the development of new civic participation structures as a form of self-protection against the spread of political and cultural colonising promoted by supranational entities.

A new concept of transnational companies offering societies consumer lifestyle as a value in itself became the core of the problem. The main matter of the analysis was to focus on the activity and operating rules of the members of alter-globalist social movements towards consumptionism. The activity of social alter-globalist movements emerged as an outcome of neoliberalism.

Globalisation processes triggered a dynamic increase of the importance of transnational corporations, whose development was rapid, yet followed by a notable rise in the awareness of alter-globalist social movements. Consumptionism became a relevant factor to integrate consumers with other members of alter-globalist movements. The problem is of notable significance as presently there exists a highly unsymmetrical relation between social and political organisations, and large supranational organisations and companies. Only a strong integration of alter-globalist circles is able to counteract them. Commodity boycotts, occupation of lands, manifestations, as well as signing petitions and protests provide the main means of expressing social dissatisfaction. The mentioned behaviours have entered the fixed repertoire of actions taken by alter-globalist movements, whose core task is to impact a broader public. This new tactics provides a modern form of civic participation in social and political areas of life, with consumption providing alter-globalist movements with the means to articulate their effective opposition. Consumptionism emerged as a culture and ideology triggered by a major economic expansion of large transnational companies pursuing a maximum profit and consistently effacing the difference between promoting goods and launching ever new elements

of mass entertainment. The analysis of research material highlighted three main elements which contribute to large transnational companies creating a new consumer culture. Firstly, a key role was played by marketing strategies implemented via strongly aggressive advertising. Secondly, shopping started to be seen as a symbolic rite. Thirdly, buying products became a compulsion since it served to continually raise one's status. The key symptom of the emergence of consumer culture has both material and non-material dimensions. The former refers to a highly dynamic expansion of shopping malls, whereas the latter revolves around branding, to have become a symbol of a new lifestyle and a new strategy for advertising goods. Presently, consumer society constitutes a peculiarity as consumption is a mass phenomenon, not applicable solely to the most wealthy and middle classes, and plays a determining role in human life.

Accelerated economic growth also provoked societies to a social and political transformation. Changes evolve alongside rapidly changing reality, which requires continual updating. The analysis of modern social and political transformations is of pronounced importance because big supranational organisations and large transnational companies have become the key political players of the contemporary world. The dissertation presents a conflict related to the development of modern civilisation mechanisms. The conflict is followed by a rise of a modern form of civic political participation in response to a new type of political and cultural colonising, strongly promoted by transnational corporations.

The research material analysis covers the period from the mid-1990s to the second decade of the 21st century. The Zapatista uprising, in Chiapas, on January 1, 1994, is considered a symbolic breakthrough, pivotal in view of the Zapatista rebels having managed to penetrate the civil society consciousness. The movement adopted a tactic of demanding the takeover of power in their own community, with claims for the state to acknowledge their structure. The tactics of the Zapatista rebels gained worldwide public approval and resulted in a prompt spread of the idea of fighting social inequalities.

The main research focus of the present thesis is on the analysis of social and political activity of the members of social alter-globalist movements towards consumptionism. The first of the two basic hypotheses formulated by the present paper is: the increasing scope of consumer culture influences the creation of alternative forms of civic participation, which may induce social participants to start social movements. The process may counterbalance the political and cultural supremacy of transnational corporations.

The analysis presented herein indicates that political attitudes of the members of alter-globalist movements towards consumptionism identify the emergence of a potent political

force, with consumers-citizens as an unexploited source of political potential and a substantial resource of social capital. Consumer alter-globalist movements have become one of the major forces shaping world affairs. Moreover, they represent a highly resilient element of contemporary civilisation, cumulating a considerable resource of social capital, to a large extent not managed in political terms.

Furthermore, the present thesis proposes the second hypothesis as follows: consumptionism promoted by global media affects societies with the phenomenon of an information implosion, which contributes to a growing alienation of societies and atomising political elites. The phenomenon of information implosion involves transforming an enormous number of messages into one mass, being a side effect of the ambiguity and excess of information and a great speed of visual message. Information supplied so dynamically and aggressively minimalizes the meaning of a single message to the extent of omitting it completely. Information implosion is not limited to one's outside world but reaches also the private space of an individual. The duration of commercials frequently exceeds the length of a programme itself, with on overriding aim of economy and capitalist policies to ensure consumption twenty-four hours a day. This state of affairs evokes grave dubiousness in an individual as to their choices and decisions, causes social alienation, and raises social concerns on the highly unclear relation between political parties and the media. Political parties strive to exert pressure on mass media so as to make the latter increasingly useful in the parties' self-interest.

The issues and problems covered herein are organised into five chapters. The first chapter deals with research problems conceptualisation and includes definitions as well as theoretical elaborations on the core research terms. Moreover, it presents all research tools employed in the paper. The analysis also comprises a reference to neo-institutional approach towards studying consumerism and a basic classification of the phenomenon. Furthermore, the chapter contains a discussion of the social and political factors shaping alter-globalist movements and definitions of consumer society. Consumerism and consumptionism are shown as a direct consequence of strategies devised by global institutions. Consumerism is analysed in terms of the following three aspects: way of life, social movement and ideology. The first chapter also makes an attempt at depicting the transformation of a citizen into a consumer-citizen. The analysis of consumerism distinguishes four forms of consumer political activity: negative collective consumerism, entailing mainly boycotts; collective consumerism, enforcing its demands; unorganised collective consumerism, which stands for supporting domestic

economy via purchasing domestic products; and negative individual consumerism, which involves participation in street protests.

The second chapter contains theoretical background to the emergence of supranational institutions and their pronounced impact on shaping consumer culture. The research material analysis shows that the global scope of the phenomenon stems from numerous relevant factors, such as the appearance of new economic players (China, Russia or India), the formation of the World Trade Organisation, the rise of global production, rapid advance of information technology, and aggressive boom of global markets. The main focus of the analysis in this chapter revolves around development strategies for transnational corporations, which originate from the process of globalisation. The influence of neoliberalism on shaping social and political relations is also analysed. The chapter is reasonably extensive since supranational organisations are the leading players on the contemporary political scene. This approach was dictated by the rapid process globalisation having been initiated by large transnational corporations themselves.

The third chapter presents an analysis of alter-globalist movements' political views towards the fostering of consumer culture. The research focuses on the analysis of the roles of a consumer-citizen and a consumer-buyer. The former category refers to individuals who take market actions aimed at creating conditions necessary to regulate the overaggressive policy of large transnational companies. This category comprises two basic trends of consumerism, i.e. positive and negative. The latter category of a consumer-buyer only regards individuals concerned for personal profit. Chapter three also analyses the importance of the mentioned categories of consumers and their modes of acting.

The fourth chapter offers chosen perspectives on alter-globalist social movements and their objection to corporational globalisation. Despite distinct discrepancies between the movements themselves, their identity, ideas and goals, they share their strive for opposing large transnational corporations. Each of the alter-globalist movements discussed employs a different mode of operating and expressing its discontent. The chapter analyses the following alter-globalist movements: Scandinavian consumer movements, Reclaim the Streets (RTS), Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions and Citizens' Action (ATTAC), the Zapatistas, and Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement. Chapter five assesses the reasons for political success and failure of modern alter-globalist movements. It also relates to their role in the shaping of contemporary globalisation model.

The analysis showed that the previously specified group of consumers-citizens is a community whose buying habits, and thus, political consumerism, actively contribute to

reinforcing political structures. Upon making their buying decisions, citizens indirectly have a voice in public and political spheres. Acting through large-scale interventions, this category of voters exert more effect than participating in parliamentary elections. Political activists often do not implement their election pledges, whereas a large-scale intervention of consumerism gives and immediate outcome. This type of political activity is used as a powerful instrument of supervision since consumers hold an enormous repertoire of behaviours and other means of expressing their dissatisfaction. The consumption of goods exerts a significant impact on politics and constitutes the actual social force with regard to shaping authentic reality. Such social changes can no longer be viewed as individual behaviours, but as civic participation, referred to as political consumerism.

The introduction to this paper poses nine specific questions. The first one deals with the reasons for conflict between the members of alter-globalist movements and transnational corporations, addressed by collective action. Conflicts between transnational corporations and alter-globalist movements are now addressed by collective actions due to three mechanisms determining society to take part in group activity. Firstly, alter-globalist movements have a clearly specified opponent and aim at effecting a clearly outlined social and political change. Conflict is understood as an opposition between two parties of a dispute, with both aspiring to take over social and political control. Secondly, group activities of alter-globalist movements are based on widely branched global networks, which enhances coordination and negotiations between the members of the movements and other social organisations. Thirdly, alter-globalist movements have a collective identity, which results in naming shared objectives and political views. This mode of behaviour is particularly enhancing for a sense of community and collective involvement in a given case. It is also relevant in enabling identification with other members of a given alter-globalist movement and reinforces a sense of belonging to a network. The rise of three new alter-globalist movements proves that the previous policy, based on class division, has been replaced with the representation of more innovative forms of political protest, which is more spontaneous. Moreover, a more decentralised and scattered form of organisation has been devised.

The second research question refers to the reasons for success and failure in the operating of alter-globalist movements. As shown by the analysis, already the presence of political discourse itself, along with other forms of contestation, boosts the chances for effective boycotts and protests. The effectiveness of alter-globalist movements is also markedly improved due to their supranational nature and multilayer structure, whereas internal divisions into fractions, which severely decrease the effectiveness of protests, constitute the major cause

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of political neutralisation and failure for alter-globalist movements. A noticeable scatter of alter-globalist movements and their diversity lead to their failure as well.

The third research question raises the issue of social consequences for increased consumption. In social terms, increased consumption has resulted in rapid political and economic changes that are decidedly faster absorbed by the young generation. Not to be excluded, the older generation has been forced to assimilate new models of cultural behaviours. The emergence of a new phenomenon of reverse socialisation resulted from an increased craving for technical advancements and new media content in younger generations. The brisk pace of introducing such changes leads to transforming norms and cultural message, with the content understood only by the younger generation. Further social impacts of consumerism involve the fact that hyperconsumption established an intricate network of relations and a great number of communication channels, leading to a more complex functioning for the society. Social and political life have become chaotic and unreliable, with citizens facing difficulties in judging their own actions objectively. The above circumstances have led to people trying to reduce their stress and fear of making decisions by spending more time purchasing frequently unnecessary goods.

Consumer hedonism, i.e. a strong tendency to experience pleasure, is yet another implication of increased consumption. Individuals pursue the possibility to satisfy their needs fast, and one of the motives for the mentioned behaviour is provided by a symbolic meaning of goods and a highly subjective sense of increasing one's importance in the realm of social stratification. Hence, consumer actions are based mainly on experiencing pleasure, and this trend is presently exploited by large corporations in providing new stimuli via producing attractive goods. To the extent not previously recognised, consumptionism has also determined the status of an individual in the society. Purchasing a great number of goods people wish to raise their social status, make a statement on their individuality and gain prestige.

The fourth research question is about the role of transnational enterprises in shaping globalisation. In view of their global scope, transnational enterprises serve a prominent role in the political functioning of many countries. Firstly, many companies have an unclear national identity, enjoy great scope, and, what is more, mainly developed countries grow rich. Corporations use intense political lobbying in less-developed countries, which often exerts negative impact on the latter's economy. Secondly, it is highly problematic to determine the national identity of such companies as they become subject to trade, which impedes the recognition of their country of origin.

The changes were initiated in the 1980s, with the entire vision for economic relations dominated by neoliberal economic thought. It became one of the mainstream trends, to result in the emergence of the process of corporational globalisation. The process of globalisation, provoked by corporations, ensured a dynamic advance and made them a specific type of economic entities, as a result of large transnational corporations functioning beyond countries and exerting great impact on international political relations.

Thus, globalisation is a process of political sphere, enhancing the reinforcement of global links and relations. A vast network of interlinked intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations was also established. Furthermore, an outline of global governance can be observed. The greatest advancement of globalisation processes was observable in political and economic spheres. The process involved removing barriers and national borders, eliminating means for protection against foreign competition, waiving laws that protected the country from the pressure exerted by global institutions. According to International Monetary Fund, globalisation became a process of increasing dependencies between countries worldwide due to a rise in the volume of transactions involving exchange of goods and services as well as capital flows, and a rapid and vast expansion of technologies.

Some parts of the world underwent major quality changes, with certain elements of the operating of large enterprises entirely escaping the authority and control of the countries in question. Thus, transnational companies gained greater autonomy of operations, with their potential continuously expanding internationally. The mentioned elements of the functioning of transnational enterprises enabled their wide discretion beyond the national borders of the countries where they operated. Large companies set their overriding objective at maximising profits, with great importance also attached to searching for new markets and innovations, which made the corporations nearly compelled to penetrating political spheres of activity. The reason is that large corporations predominantly pursue the most favourable conditions possible for functioning on a global scale and free implementation of the goals set.

The following, fifth research question refers to the forming of new structural methods relating to the process of globalisation.

Social demand for new structural methods relating to the process of globalisation unexpectedly resulted in an entire range of new solutions for consumers-citizens to participate in political and social life. New categories of participation in political and social life emerged for consumers-citizens, individuals who take actions for the benefit of their community, enforce their rights through purchasing and boycotting goods, which enabled influencing political decisions regardless of parliamentary elections. In this respect, political participation by the

activists of alter-globalist movements – consumer ones included - showed that traditional parliamentary election became obsolete and incommensurate to the social and political situation. This process implies that national state no longer has political tools able to update large-scale world politics, principally based on the economic dominance of big transnational corporations. The analysis of research material revealed two basic trends of political consumerism, with the first one identified as positive consumerism, which stands for rational and purposeful acquisition of goods and directly reflects the views and political preference of the consumer. The second identified trend in consumer behaviours is negative consumerism, which involves boycotting companies, criticising policies and announcing public campaigns. Dissatisfaction is expressed via marches, manifestations and street protests. This new method of voicing social discontent resulted in distinguishing the category of a consumer-citizen, who employs practical political consumerism directly and actively to take a political stance and effectively reinforce the structure of new consumer policy. This type of consumer tactics provides an innovative solution and presents a new form of civic participation in political sphere. The implementation of this political role is very effectively articulated through consumption.

The sixth research question referred to the determinants of the increase in importance for consumers-citizens. The significance of the social role of consumers-citizens grows proportionally to the increase and importance of consumption, and so their impact on the political arena has multiplied. The reason is that consumer movements have increasing funds, which extends the choice of goods, concurrently reinforcing the impact of consumers-citizens on politics. The process of integrating consumers-citizens with the social system has also gained relevance as it implies new forms of active participation in the political functioning of a country, as well as creation and rationalisation of political decisions. The importance of this process stems from the strongly unbalanced relation between transnational corporations and social organisations observed at present. Corporations have superior advantage over consumers and only consolidated integration of alter-globalist movements, consumer ones included, can counterbalance them. Consumers-citizens strive to minimalize the degradation of natural environment and use commodity markets as the arena for political actions.

The seventh research question discusses the role played by political consumerism and the influence of alter-globalist behaviours of consumer movements on the society and its political system. Alter-globalist consumer movements exert a profound impact on politics and show how potent a society in fact is in profiling the surrounding reality. The responsibility for those changes in their present form cannot be viewed in terms of individual behaviours, but in

the meaning of civic society participation, referred to as political consumerism. Never before in history was the position of consumers so consolidated and never did it have its political aspirations so distinctly outlined. Through political consumerism, the new category of consumers-citizens takes an active part in reinforcing civic and political structures. The reason is that making consumer decisions, citizens-consumers have a direct voice in public and political spheres. The category of consumers-citizens should possess knowledge and competence to take rational and responsible decisions both in terms of political and economic issues.

The eighth research question deals with the way consumer-citizen awareness impacts the shaping of long-term political and social effects. The issues of awareness appear to be of the greatest importance since consumers-citizens ought to realise that their choices result not only in the short-term achievement of satisfaction but are important in terms of their long-term political and social effect.

The process runs very fluently as it requires the ability to make balanced market decisions, and intensified educational efforts supplement it, helping to transform the modern consumer into an informed citizen. It is favourable for numerous reasons:

- in individual terms, it enhances making reasonable market decisions, ensures high level of autonomy in implementing them, and contributes to continual improvement of the quality of life for the citizens and to promoting acceptable norms and values;

- in political terms, it triggers increased civic awareness, allowing to fight certain negative economic effects stemming from excessive consumption;

- proper education also guarantees reliable information, which, as a result, raises the level of satisfaction for consumers-voters, and, consequently, increases their loyalty to political and economic circles.

The last, ninth, research question pertains to the impact of alter-globalist consumer movements on political life. The new, distinguished above, category of consumers-citizens is a community that actively participates in and reinforces political and civic structures via political consumerism. This takes place because citizens have a direct and indirect say in political and social spheres through taking numerous consumer decisions. Due to interventions on a mass scale, opinions and actions taken by the new category of voters are many a time more effective than participating in parliamentary elections. Politicians sometimes do not comply with their pre-electoral promises, whereas mass-scale intervention gives an instant result. The fact that alter-globalist social movements entered international political arena with an unprecedented dynamism poses a great novelty. Political initiatives involve disarmament, worldwide peace,

excessive consumptionism and unequal distribution of global resources. However, despite large-scale political response and extensive quality changes, global civic society has not emerged, which entails certain repercussions due to lack of any counterweight to international capital. Citizens of industrialised countries keep pace with the advancing globalisation, which does not take place in countries of less-developed civic society, states functioning on the brink of globalisation. They are too strongly separated from the core of globalisation and cannot protect their interests effectively. Lack of a functioning global public is an important factor in not forming a global civic society. At present, the western European is the only existing global public, and, as it belongs to the core of globalisation, it is not representative for the whole globe. As a result, the role of the creator of worldwide public is taken over by western countries, which does not favour the integration of societies from other cultural backgrounds, and does not trigger a strive for setting common supranational goals. Contemporary consumerism determined a dictatorship of production behaviours, which provides models for political, economic and social procedures. Upon analysis, the research material revealed that modern consumers provide an enormous, unexploited political and social potential, make up an inexhaustible source of political capital and a force capable of peacefully diminishing production seen as harmful and exacting laws on the protection of natural environment. Having introduced ecological issues into political repertoire, alter-globalist movements set new political standards and brought a new dimension and quality to politics.

The process of globalisation has become a forum for the introduction of new actors into political space, ones who demand assuming control over transnational corporations and supranational institutions. A consensus between, on the one hand, transnational corporations and supranational institutions, and, on the other, globalised societies with utterly opposing interests to the former party, will largely decide on the dynamics of globalisation and contestation or acceptance of the proposed social and economic order. Moreover, globalisation as a process combining many social, political and economic fields, resulted in a most interesting hybrid of social and political roles played by consumers-citizens, showing that those theoretically incompatible social roles may coexist. The process of political and economic globalisation to some extent globalised the social roles of the members of international relations. Due to the concurrence of alter-globalist movements in terms of excessive consumptionism, breaches of human rights and uncontrolled movement of capital, societies realised that large transnational corporations no longer merely produce goods, but are also the most potent political players in the modern world. Neoliberal politics has not succeeded as

panacea for the widespread prosperity of societies, and the liberalisation of global market impeded the development of many countries and triggered increased social inequalities.

Despite its vast scope, consumption should not be perceived only as a source of potential threat, in view of the undeniable fact that it makes everyday lives easier and allows to satisfy needs much more promptly and efficiently. A more pragmatic attitude suggests that instead of evading the widespread consumption, one should adopt the attitude of a rational buyer who is aware of their consumer behaviours and skilled at protecting their rights. No powerful corporations, regardless of their capital and scope, can force consumers to purchase their goods.

The modern consumer-citizen poses an underutilised social and political potential and provides the background for substantial social capital. Alter-globalist movements viewed from this angle revealed vast existing possibilities in dynamically growing civic-consumer movement. Consumers-citizens are highly effective in playing their role of preserving political and social order, and are able to influence political players as to eliminating and diminishing unequal distribution of goods. The process of globalisation markedly reduced the importance of civic status and became the factor that triggered the withdrawal of citizens into their individual sphere, which resulted in substantial impairment of democratic procedure. The realm of consumption became a political area, and the sense of ever lesser influence exerted on politics by an individual proved that consumption gained the status of the major sphere for civil liberties.

To summarise, two basic conclusions can be drawn: the first one presents consumerism as dictatorship of market behaviours which set the canon of behaviours for economy, politics and social relations, noting that it would be most difficult to identify a field of human activity unaffected by the concepts utilised by large transnational corporations. The second conclusion involves the idea that contemporary consumers-citizens comprise a vast unexploited social and political potential, and constitute an inexhaustible source of political capital. Alter-globalist social movements pose a force able to exact laws on uncontrolled consumptionism, natural environment protection and peaceful ways of diminishing the branches of economy which are considered harmful.

Two possible scenarios can be devised for the functioning of civic objection and transnational enterprises in the future. The first scenario represents the attitude that modern worldwide order is a global dictatorship of large companies, assuming unrestrained advancement of transnational corporations, and any attempts at reforming the system will be ineffective. No doubt, transnational corporations are of key might in terms of political and economic relations, and the balance between attempts at colonising the world made by large

companies, and political and economic state control will depend on the society and its actions. The other alternative involves effective control over large enterprises through establishing international institutions with regard to excessive consumption, protection of employment rights or environmental preservation. The process of corporational globalisation unquestionably offers one of the new variables which initiate processes and phenomena occurring both on the level of environment and national states.

Monika Krzeszewska