Consumer Citizenship and Cross-Class Activism: The Case of
the National Consumers’ League, 1899–1918

Jeffrey Haydu

Political consumerism is often criticized for its failure to cross class lines, a failure linked to the economic resources and cultural capital of affluent consumers. The early history of the National Consumers’ League (NCL) illustrates how an alternative model of consumer citizenship can lead privileged shoppers to draw social boundaries in different ways. The NCL included lower-class women and children as beneficiaries and occasional allies in consumer campaigns, but distanced itself from the organized labor movement. This alternative model of political consumerism is traced to the gender and class cultures of reformist women in the Progressive Era.

KEY WORDS: boundaries; class; gender; labor; political consumerism; social movements.

INTRODUCTION

Promoting progressive social change through conscientious consumption choices has an undeniable appeal. It offers hope of making a difference at times when conventional political paths are closed and in places where national governments cannot reach; it combines political virtue with consumer satisfaction; and it demands less time and carries less risk than does collective public protest (Bennett 2004; Holzer 2006; Micheletti 2003; Scammell 2000). Political consumerism has also been criticized on many grounds, from the practical (it cannot work) to the philosophical (it impoversishes citizenship) (for surveys, see Hilton 2009; Micheletti, Folloesdal, and Stolle 2004; Shah et al. 2007). In a particularly important arena for contemporary political consumerism—activism to reform the food system—one well-honed critique focuses particularly on class biases (Cone and Myhre 2000; DeLind and Ferguson 1999; Guthman 2003; Hinrichs and Allen 2008). Patronizing farmers’ markets, enrolling in community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs, or preparing Slow Food may support local agriculture and reduce environmental damage, but typically none of these actions benefit or include low-income producers or consumers of food. There are at least three reasons for these exclusions. The consumer choices involved may be ethically informed, but they are available only to the affluent. For many conscientious consumers, moreover, these choices involve conspicuous displays of superior tastes and knowledge—demonstrations of cultural capital that do not cross class boundaries. Finally, the vision of an alternative

1 My thanks to Marissa Ruxin for research assistance and to Katherine Mooney, Tad Skotnicki, Michael Haedicke, Sharon Zuzkin, and reviewers for Sociological Forum for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

2 Department of Sociology, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, California 92093-0533; e-mail: jhaydu@ucsd.edu.
agriculture that attracts these conscientious consumers foregrounds yeoman farmers and sustainable environmental practices; wage labor is largely left out of the picture.

Set against this critique of class privilege in political consumerism, the National Consumers’ League (NCL) presents a puzzle. This U.S. organization was one of the earliest proponents of responsible consumerism as a tool for social justice, and its campaigns included fights against the adulteration and fraudulent marketing of food. Its members, like contemporary locavores, were overwhelmingly affluent and often frank about their social positions and sophisticated tastes. For the purposes of this article, it is that combination of elevated positions in both economic and cultural hierarchies that defines higher “class.” Yet unlike most of today’s locavores, NCL leaders also explicitly connected food and class. Safer food, they argued, required better wages and working conditions for food workers. And to heighten market pressure on manufacturers of food and clothing to treat their employees better, NCL leaders were careful to reach out across class lines. That crossing of class boundaries in defining both the beneficiaries and allies of consumer action cannot be explained on the basis of NCL members’ economic positions or cultural capital. But the NCL’s more inclusive political consumerism also had its limits. Above all, the organization refused to work with trade unions in consumer campaigns to improve wages and working conditions. The resulting friction with organized labor was a main reason why, in 1918, the League largely abandoned consumer campaigns in favor of legislative action.

How are we to explain the particular ways in which the NCL drew the boundaries defining its beneficiaries and allies? Both the impressive extent and the limits of the NCL’s cross-class consumer action, I will argue, can be traced to the NCL’s guiding model of consumer citizenship. “Citizenship” highlights both the character of participation in the public sphere and the duties imposed on these participants (Glenn 2011). According to the women—still lacking the vote—who led the NCL, one important way in which they could be public actors was through their roles as consumers, and that function carried certain societal obligations. I will show how the NCL’s model of consumer citizenship applied to consumption both an upper-class ethic of civic duty and a maternalist ideology common among Progressive women. This model supported a cross-class consumer movement, making poor workers the main beneficiaries, and a kind of ally, of affluent consumer activists. But it also inhibited NCL cooperation with the labor movement of the time. My primary goal in this article, accordingly, is to show how historically specific understandings of consumer citizenship set the social boundaries for the NCL’s use of market leverage to advance political goals. Because these understandings, in turn, were embedded in the gender and class cultures of a particular time, my account of the NCL is not directly applicable to contemporary political consumerism. What does apply, however, is a larger lesson: different models of consumer citizenship do important boundary work that complements, and can even trump, the influence of class-based economic resources and tastes.

3 The term citizen consumer was advanced by Lizabeth Cohen (2003) to describe the ideal, in the 1930s and early 1940s, of consumer power as an egalitarian vehicle for promoting the public good. The NCL’s version of consumer citizenship, by contrast, portrayed consumption as a means for disenfranchised women to exercise middle- and upper-class social responsibility.
In the next section, I flesh out the critique of contemporary political consumerism’s class bias and suggest how the social movement literature offers alternative tools for analyzing boundary work in ethical consumerism. I then provide additional background on the NCL, its value as a case study for rethinking class boundaries in political consumerism, and the sources used for this study. In the main sections of the article, I demonstrate how gender and class cultures came together to shape the NCL’s model of consumer citizenship and, in that way, guided its selective cross-class activism.

**POLITICAL CONSUMERISM AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT BOUNDARIES**

Political consumerism shares with other new social movements a disproportionately middle-class constituency, one that is well educated and affluent (Andersen and Tobiasen 2004; Lorenzen 2012; Stolle and Hooghe 2004). Whatever the sources of this middle-class bias in new social movements generally (Melucci 1989), in political consumerism class bias is strongly reinforced by the fact that grassroots activism relies on purchasing power and educated tastes. Purchasing power selects for richer consumers; the need to discern political virtues in goods and services can turn ethical consumption into a display of cultural capital (Shah et al. 2007). In consumer politics focused on food, this pattern is well documented (Hinrichs 2000; Hinrichs and Allen 2008; Winne 2008). Scholars consistently find a middle-class tilt to participation. Whether buying organic food, shopping at farmers’ markets, enrolling in community supported agriculture (CSA) programs, selecting Fair Trade products, or eating humanely raised animals, politically engaged consumers are relatively well-off. They have to be: organic produce, locally grown foods, Fair Trade coffee, and free-range chickens all cost more than conventional versions. Critics note, too, that exercising these preferences fits neatly within a larger pattern of high-brow food consumption in which a conspicuous display of esoteric knowledge is a way to claim status (Donati 2005; Johnston and Baumann 2010). Just as knowing the most authentic ethnic restaurants and most exotic heirloom vegetables signals cultural capital, so does the ability to distinguish sustainably harvested fish and rain forest-friendly coffee from less virtuous varieties.

The class bias in contemporary food politics is not, however, simply a matter of who participates. It extends to the underlying political agenda of participants. For many of these participants, the politics is highly personal: surveys of those who buy food from CSAs and farmers’ markets consistently find that food quality—its taste, freshness, and healthfulness—is the purchaser’s most important consideration (Donati 2005; Johnston and Baumann 2010). Just as knowing the most authentic ethnic restaurants and most exotic heirloom vegetables signals cultural capital, so does the ability to distinguish sustainably harvested fish and rain forest-friendly coffee from less virtuous varieties.

The class bias in contemporary food politics is not, however, simply a matter of who participates. It extends to the underlying political agenda of participants. For many of these participants, the politics is highly personal: surveys of those who buy food from CSAs and farmers’ markets consistently find that food quality—its taste, freshness, and healthfulness—is the purchaser’s most important consideration (Donati 2005; Johnston and Baumann 2010). Just as knowing the most authentic ethnic restaurants and most exotic heirloom vegetables signals cultural capital, so does the ability to distinguish sustainably harvested fish and rain forest-friendly coffee from less virtuous varieties.

The class bias in contemporary food politics is not, however, simply a matter of who participates. It extends to the underlying political agenda of participants. For many of these participants, the politics is highly personal: surveys of those who buy food from CSAs and farmers’ markets consistently find that food quality—its taste, freshness, and healthfulness—is the purchaser’s most important consideration (Donati 2005; Johnston and Baumann 2010). Just as knowing the most authentic ethnic restaurants and most exotic heirloom vegetables signals cultural capital, so does the ability to distinguish sustainably harvested fish and rain forest-friendly coffee from less virtuous varieties.

The class bias in contemporary food politics is not, however, simply a matter of who participates. It extends to the underlying political agenda of participants. For many of these participants, the politics is highly personal: surveys of those who buy food from CSAs and farmers’ markets consistently find that food quality—its taste, freshness, and healthfulness—is the purchaser’s most important consideration (Donati 2005; Johnston and Baumann 2010). Just as knowing the most authentic ethnic restaurants and most exotic heirloom vegetables signals cultural capital, so does the ability to distinguish sustainably harvested fish and rain forest-friendly coffee from less virtuous varieties.

The class bias in contemporary food politics is not, however, simply a matter of who participates. It extends to the underlying political agenda of participants. For many of these participants, the politics is highly personal: surveys of those who buy food from CSAs and farmers’ markets consistently find that food quality—its taste, freshness, and healthfulness—is the purchaser’s most important consideration (Donati 2005; Johnston and Baumann 2010). Just as knowing the most authentic ethnic restaurants and most exotic heirloom vegetables signals cultural capital, so does the ability to distinguish sustainably harvested fish and rain forest-friendly coffee from less virtuous varieties.

The class bias in contemporary food politics is not, however, simply a matter of who participates. It extends to the underlying political agenda of participants. For many of these participants, the politics is highly personal: surveys of those who buy food from CSAs and farmers’ markets consistently find that food quality—its taste, freshness, and healthfulness—is the purchaser’s most important consideration (Donati 2005; Johnston and Baumann 2010). Just as knowing the most authentic ethnic restaurants and most exotic heirloom vegetables signals cultural capital, so does the ability to distinguish sustainably harvested fish and rain forest-friendly coffee from less virtuous varieties.

The class bias in contemporary food politics is not, however, simply a matter of who participates. It extends to the underlying political agenda of participants. For many of these participants, the politics is highly personal: surveys of those who buy food from CSAs and farmers’ markets consistently find that food quality—its taste, freshness, and healthfulness—is the purchaser’s most important consideration (Donati 2005; Johnston and Baumann 2010). Just as knowing the most authentic ethnic restaurants and most exotic heirloom vegetables signals cultural capital, so does the ability to distinguish sustainably harvested fish and rain forest-friendly coffee from less virtuous varieties.

The class bias in contemporary food politics is not, however, simply a matter of who participates. It extends to the underlying political agenda of participants. For many of these participants, the politics is highly personal: surveys of those who buy food from CSAs and farmers’ markets consistently find that food quality—its taste, freshness, and healthfulness—is the purchaser’s most important consideration (Donati 2005; Johnston and Baumann 2010). Just as knowing the most authentic ethnic restaurants and most exotic heirloom vegetables signals cultural capital, so does the ability to distinguish sustainably harvested fish and rain forest-friendly coffee from less virtuous varieties.

The class bias in contemporary food politics is not, however, simply a matter of who participates. It extends to the underlying political agenda of participants. For many of these participants, the politics is highly personal: surveys of those who buy food from CSAs and farmers’ markets consistently find that food quality—its taste, freshness, and healthfulness—is the purchaser’s most important consideration (Donati 2005; Johnston and Baumann 2010). Just as knowing the most authentic ethnic restaurants and most exotic heirloom vegetables signals cultural capital, so does the ability to distinguish sustainably harvested fish and rain forest-friendly coffee from less virtuous varieties.

The class bias in contemporary food politics is not, however, simply a matter of who participates. It extends to the underlying political agenda of participants. For many of these participants, the politics is highly personal: surveys of those who buy food from CSAs and farmers’ markets consistently find that food quality—its taste, freshness, and healthfulness—is the purchaser’s most important consideration (Donati 2005; Johnston and Baumann 2010). Just as knowing the most authentic ethnic restaurants and most exotic heirloom vegetables signals cultural capital, so does the ability to distinguish sustainably harvested fish and rain forest-friendly coffee from less virtuous varieties.
But these laudable ideals, by omission, reinforce the class bias from affluent consumers’ economic resources and cultural capital. The emphasis on “quality” favors a two-tier system. Those with enough money get the “good” food: unprocessed, local, seasonal, wholesome. Those without get what they can afford: the cheap calories mass produced by an industrial food system (Alkon and Norgaard 2009; Gottlieb and Joshi 2010; Hinrichs and Kremer, 2002; Johnston, Szabo, and Rodney 2011). And the emphasis on small farmers and environmental sustainability leaves wage earners off the agenda. Organic fruit and genetically modified (GM)—free vegetables have environmental benefits, but they may still be picked and weeded by low-wage workers (Allen 2004; Haedicke 2013; Smith 2003).

These criticisms of contemporary consumer movements around food, then, emphasize how the economic affluence, cultural capital, and agrarian ideals of middle-class activists exclude the participation and concerns of less-privileged food producers and consumers. The role played by those agrarian ideals, however, helps build bridges in other directions. The virtues of yeoman farmers and sustainable agriculture bring together locavores concerned primarily with food quality and those motivated more by environmental stewardship. That dual movement—marginalizing labor but broadening coalitions along environmentalist lines—illustrates a more general, and more hopeful, theme from the social movements literature: the boundaries of activism can be surprisingly malleable, depending on how organizers frame movement issues and identities. In studies of issue framing, the basic point is that generalized or “master frames are associated with more inclusive movement coalitions (Carroll and Ratner 1996; Gerhards and Rucht 1992), a pattern found in such fields as antinuclear politics (Benford 1993), environmentalism (Faber 2005), opposition to GM organisms (Buttel 2000), and campus activism (Van Dyke 2003).

The pattern holds, as well, for class divisions. Organizers have been able to assemble cross-class coalitions, overcoming apparent conflicts of economic interest and activist style (Croteau 1995), by reframing the issues at stake. They did so in the case of resistance to a new biodefense laboratory in a Boston working-class community, using the language of environmental justice (Beamish and Luebbers 2009). They did so in the struggle over military conversion in Maine, rallying blue-collar workers and middle-class antinuclear activists behind a “peace economy” (Rose 2000). And they did so in the “deep coalitions” studied by Dean and Reynolds (2009), working to foster more egalitarian economic growth under the banner of democratic regional development.

Reframing of identities also can overcome seemingly deep social cleavages. In Ganz’s (2009) study of the United Farm Workers in the mid-1960s, for example, a crucial breakthrough was union leaders’ redefinition of the struggle, as one not of farm labor seeking union recognition, but as one of an exploited minority seeking basic civil rights. That reframing of “who we are” helped redraw the boundaries of contention, allying rural Mexican American wage earners with urban, middle-class, white student activists. Gerteis (2007), similarly, shows how local Knights of Labor and People’s Party activists in the 1880s at least briefly bridged the racial divide by redefining wage earners as virtuous republican producers, a category that included former slaves engaged in a similar struggle for economic independence. Polletta adds that activists may, in effect, reach outside the immediate field of struggle for
the identities that define who is, and is not, one of us. For some pacifist groups in the 1930s, the preferred model was one of religious fellowship. That model checked some internal inequalities on the grounds that participants were "equal before God." In women’s liberation collectives in the 1960s, the model was one of friendship, helping lower some interpersonal boundaries in collective decision making (Polletta 2002).

The model of consumer citizenship at work in the NCL played a similar role. It was a way of framing members’ identities and obligations as consumers. Where today’s locavores sometimes declare their responsibility to small farmers and the environment, the NCL assigned good citizens responsibility for using their consumer power to benefit society’s least fortunate members. That framing supported a cross-class agenda for ethical consumption of food and clothing, but it did so selectively. It included poor women and children, but it largely excluded organized labor. The underlying criteria for this good citizenship, in turn, came from the particular gender and class cultures of NCL activists.

CASE AND SOURCES

The NCL began as a middle-class support group for ill-paid and overworked women in department stores and garment shops. In 1889, a well-publicized investigation into job conditions for sales clerks in leading New York City department stores inspired a number of socially prominent women to prepare and circulate a list of stores that treated employees well and thus deserved the patronage of conscientious shoppers. This initiative was formalized in the Consumers’ League of New York in 1891. Similar leagues in other cities came together in 1899 to form the NCL (Storrs 2000; Wiedenhoft 2002). Although open to all, the NCL’s leadership and membership were overwhelmingly female, and it worked closely with other women’s organizations (notably the General Federation of Women’s Clubs and the Women’s Christian Temperance Union) in its major campaigns. These women, moreover, were at least comfortably well-off, financing much of the League’s early campaigns and relying in part on elite social networks to publicize their efforts (NCL Annual Reports 1902–03:6).

First among the leaders was Florence Kelley, the NCL’s general secretary and the woman most likely to represent the League in legislative testimony and public statements. Her gradualist socialism was less typical of the League’s membership and policy than the philanthropic political consumerism of leaders like Maud Nathan, a New York City society matron who helped organize, fund, and direct the League. The organization’s guiding principle was that through their patronage of shops and their purchase of goods, consumers were the employers of labor. If consumers conscientiously shopped at stores and selected products from firms that treated employees well, they could improve conditions for the nation’s most vulnerable workers. If, instead, they shopped carelessly and sought the lowest prices, they condemned those workers to continued exploitation. “Responsibility for some of the worst evils from which producers suffer rests with the consumers who seek the cheapest markets regardless of how cheapness is brought about,” the NCL’s
constitution proclaimed. It is “the duty of consumers to find out under what conditions the articles they purchase are produced and distributed, and insist that these conditions shall be wholesome and consistent with a respectable existence on the part of the workers.”

Two of the League’s main tasks, accordingly, were investigation and education. Its members had confidence that studying social problems was the first step toward solving them, and many of them had the training to conduct research. League officials deputized these women to prepare reports on conditions in garment factories, adulterants in foods, and hours of labor in department stores. The League used their findings for the second task, education. Exhibits at fairs, meetings open to the public, talks at women’s clubs, and paid advertisements in prominent newspapers all served to heighten awareness of the differences between decent and exploitative shops and between pure and adulterated food (NCL Annual Report 1901–02:7, 22; NCL Office File, Chartered Leagues, Massachusetts, Mrs. Beale’s Report for the Year 1903; NCL Organization Files, Annual Reports for 1905:10, and for 1907–09:53–55). In a number of industries, if employers agreed to observe certain minimum conditions for labor and to accept periodic monitoring, they would be granted the League’s seal of approval—the “White Label”—by which informed consumers would recognize them for their virtue and reward them by making purchases.

The NCL applied this tactic on a number of fronts, including the manufacture of women’s underwear, tenement production of foods and garments, messenger services, and laundries. And from the start, they complemented the tactic with agitation for laws to limit working hours for women and to reduce child labor (Dirks 1996; Nathan 1986 [1926]). Both strategies had their successes. League efforts deserve partial credit for the passage and subsequent legal defense of several key, state-level laws (Goldmark 1953). Its consumer campaigns also made their mark, both directly by pressuring businesses and indirectly by encouraging political leaders to support progressive legislation. A similar twofold strategy can be seen in another major NCL campaign, one for improved food safety. Since the late 1880s, reformers had made repeated efforts to pass a federal law requiring accurate labeling of food ingredients and barring the use of harmful additives. These efforts gained momentum in the early 1900s, and the NCL contributed vigorously. On one hand, it dispatched speakers to educate consumers about misleading and harmful practices in the food industry, and it helped circulate lists of safe foods and food suppliers. On the other hand, it supported the more conventional political strategy of lobbying for federal legislation, with success coming in the form of the 1906 Food and Drug Act (Goodwin 1999). By 1918, however, the League had largely abandoned its White Label strategy and its consumer campaign for pure food. Instead, it sought more favorable laws regulating labor conditions and more effective enforcement of the Food and Drug Act (Dirks 1996; Wiedenhoft 2002; Wolfe 1975).

It is the character and fate of the NCL’s pioneering consumer campaigns that concern us here, because it is here, with the reliance on purchasing power to achieve social change, that the dilemma of class boundaries is most acute. Particularly in its work for pure food, the NCL offers a sharp contrast to comparable food activism today. The organization explicitly linked pure food to class inequality, highlighting the employment conditions of food producers and the fact that the most common
victims of adulterated food were the poor. While it reached across class lines, however, the NCL did so in a discriminating way. It energetically came to the defense of women and children but, by and large, ignored ill-paid men; it championed the poorest rather than the middling wage earner; and it favored the non-union over the unionized employee. And although the NCL made common cause with labor unions in some of its legislative efforts, it kept its distance from—and sometimes conflicted with—unions in its consumer campaigns. The League’s selectivity is important both historically and sociologically. Historically, it represents a road not taken, depriving organized labor of a significant middle-class ally at a time when U.S. employers made a militant turn against trade unions. Sociologically, it presents a puzzle that cannot be solved by applying generalizations about economic resources and cultural capital in contemporary food activism. The puzzle lies not just in why a consumer movement of affluent women reached across class lines, but also in why they defined appropriate beneficiaries and allies in the particular ways that they did.

The answer to both questions, I will argue, has more to do with the NCL’s guiding model of good citizenship, one quite different from the environmental stewardship that motivates contemporary advocacy of alternative and sustainable agriculture. To demonstrate the importance of the League’s model, I rely on two main methodological strategies. The first is, in effect, correlation, showing how the details of the NCL’s model of citizenship match the specifics of its boundary work. The second traces influence through actors, showing how key NCL figures used specific principles of good citizenship to justify their strategic choices. I use a mix of secondary and primary sources to document these correlations and justifications. The secondary literature is generally adequate for the NCL’s strategic choices—what positions it publicly endorsed, what campaigns it launched, whom it included in those campaigns, and whom it excluded. Primary sources are more important for identifying how actors defined the good consumer citizen and, above all, how they put those definitions to work in making and justifying their choices. Which actors? As far as possible, I focus on the personal and institutional actors that played the most important roles. People like Kelley and Nathan can be tracked as they explain themselves in memoirs, official correspondence, and public statements. The institutional actors are the constitution, rules, and formal decisions that guided NCL members. These appear in official documents and organizational records. The records of the NCL, available on microfilm, offer the richest collection of these personal and institutional sources. Researchers may wish for more thorough documentation on a wider range of actors within the NCL. But in the present case, the gaps in the historical record do not raise concerns about selection bias because the best-documented actors are also the ones whose thinking and actions mattered most.

GENDER, CIVIC DUTY, AND CROSS-CLASS CONSUMER CITIZENSHIP

The NCL was one of the most prominent prewar voices defending labor’s right to decent working conditions, demanding consumers’ right to safe food, and explicitly connecting those two goals. Before World War I, one important way in which
the League sought to achieve both aims was by promoting conscientious purchasing on the part of affluent women. This combination of a cross-class agenda and a consumer strategy was supported by a particular ideal of consumer citizenship, one rooted in the gender ideology and class-based sense of civic duty of NCL women. In the following subsections, I document the contributions of gender and class cultures to the NCL’s model of consumer citizenship, emphasizing how these ideals supported cross-class advocacy for food and labor reform. For the purposes of both analytical and organizational clarity, I divide the presentation into gender and class sources of consumer citizenship. As the discussion will make clear, however, these influences intersect at various points, including the class-based nature of NCL women’s self-defined role as conscientious consumers and the gendered inflection of their upper-class civic culture.

**Gender**

At the time of the NCL’s founding, women lacked the vote and political activism was generally considered both unladylike and a distraction from their primary responsibilities as wives and mothers. Even the leading organization of reform-minded women at the time, the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (GFWC), regularly had to reassure constituents that public engagement was legitimate—if the causes and tactics were suitable to women and if they continued to honor their domestic duties (General Federation of Women’s Clubs n.d.: passim.). For their part, NCL leaders reminded members that women’s economic roles had fundamentally changed. Household necessities like clothes and preserved foods, once made in middle-class homes, were now manufactured elsewhere, to be purchased as finished commodities. On one side, that left to middle-class women “leisure for study, recreation and philanthropy.” On the other, it brought low-wage work “into the homes of the poor” or drew working-class women out of their homes into “factories, workshops, [and] stores” (NCL Annual Report 1901–02:26). This movement of labor and of women between home and workplace, NCL general secretary Kelley (1899:298–299) concluded, made it “very natural that the first effort to educate the great body of [shoppers] concerning the power of the purchaser should have been undertaken by women, among women, on behalf of women and children.” Denied suffrage and now positioned more as consumer than as producer, affluent women’s best opportunities to act as good citizens lay in their informed and ethical shopping. League women also practiced more conventional political lobbying, and even conscientious consumption involved public action to conduct investigations and disseminate the findings. Yet here, too, they drew on traditional gender norms to legitimate their actions. Scholars have shown that this was an era of maternalist politics in which educated women became increasingly active in reform politics—while justifying that public engagement as appropriate for moral guardians of home and family (Clemens 1997; Gordon 1995; Skocpol 1992). The key ideological move was to reframe home and family in wider terms, whereby public policies to protect mothers and children represented women’s maternal duties writ large. In part, this move was pragmatic. To discharge their proper functions at home, female reformers
argued, women had to become politically active. Doing so should come naturally to women, however, because the wider community was an extension of the household. “Every department of the home,” Maud Nathan (1986 [1926]:19) argued, “is but a reflection in miniature of the broader departments of the municipality and the world.” For Alice Lakey (1905), head of the NCL’s Food Committee, redefining the boundaries of the home in this way meant that “women are housekeepers of the land,” with a corresponding responsibility to safeguard the nation’s food supply. Women, accordingly, should work to win passage of a pure food bill.

League members extended this maternalist logic from political to consumer action. NCL officials did more than assign to affluent women an important role as consumers; they also argued that this role should be used for social good. Here, however, women’s gendered natures presented a dilemma. On one side, much as suffrage advocates argued that women’s essential moral nature made them ideal voters (Lebsock 1990), so some League members claimed that it made them ethical consumers. On the other side, living up to that ideal would not be easy. Women had to resist their equally natural impulses to shop for the best bargains and to be seduced by frivolities. Nathan (1986 [1926]: 13) recalled how upper-class New York women “dropped in casually at Arnold, Constable’s or Lord and Taylor’s to see what novelties were displayed on the counters” and would show off the items they had acquired at low cost “through the efforts of the home dressmaker.” The NCL’s research and education aimed to dispel such ignorance and thus help women’s higher nature prevail. The consumer citizen, then, was not only feminine, but also virtuous. She resisted her lower, and rose to her higher, gendered self.

National Consumers’ League members’ understanding of their roles as consumers and their responsibilities as wives and mothers thus helped to legitimate their activism and to direct it, in part, toward a specifically consumerist strategy. It also supported the League’s commitment to making lower-class women and children the primary beneficiaries of that strategy. Of course, there were practical considerations as well. Leaders recognized that the workers involved were the least likely to have anyone else, including unions, fighting for their interests (Wiedenhoft 2002; Wolfe 1975). It also became clear from the NCL’s parallel legislative efforts that protecting female and child labor commanded more support in the United States. Within limits, the perceived vulnerability of women and minors, together with the public interest in healthy mothers, offset the usual judicial and popular reluctance to allow state meddling in the individual worker’s freedom to contract for whatever employment he chose (Goldmark 1953; Vose 1957). But practical political considerations aside, maternalist considerations also steered the NCL in this direction. Children and women needed to be kept safe, and not just from long hours and low wages. They also needed protection from the moral perils to which these conditions exposed them. In its campaign to curb the use of younger boys by messenger services, for example, the League raised the alarm about the “permanent demoralization of children due to this service. The irregular hours...with the consequent recourse to coffee and cigarettes...the frequent temptation to purloin money and valuables entrusted by strangers to boys at the critical age of the keenest love of adventure; the association with street boys of every quality...all these things have the messenger service [ranking] among the
boy-destroying trades” (NCL Annual Report 1903–04:20–21; see also Dirks 1996). League members, as women, had a duty to act as moral guardians of these fragile young souls.

In the pure food campaign, similarly, NCL women were exercising what they saw as a specifically feminine consumer responsibility to make sure that food be accurately labeled and honestly marketed. They were also discharging their maternal obligation to protect the household from unsafe products. When the NCL’s Food Committee, in 1907, recommended the distribution of leaflets on the dangers posed by cheap candy, they specifically emphasized that the information “would be of great interest to the mothers of little children.” Yet the maternal responsibility exercised by all women shoppers (Deutsch 2010) extended to the larger national family, and that link between women and the larger national household helped connect consumers with low-wage producers. NCL leaders stressed that protecting family members from unsafe food required protecting the “health and welfare of employees in all establishments for the manufacture and distribution of food products” (NCL Annual Report 1906–07:48). In reporting to the national meeting of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs on the activities of the NCL, Harriet Van Der Vaart made the same connection for what we eat and for what we wear. “While the food we eat essentially concerns the health of the people, the conditions and wages of those who prepare the food and make our garments more vitally concern the health of our nation.” Those conditions and wages should matter to NCL members in part because of their implications for protecting their own families. Poorly paid workers making clothes and food in sweatshops and tenements could easily pass infections on to consumers (General Federation of Women’s Clubs, 8th Biennial Meeting, 1906:171; Nathan 1986 [1926]:63, 75; Tomes 1998).

Class

It may be unsurprising that gender ideology directed NCL women both across class lines, to their less fortunate sisters, and toward consumer strategies. Those expectations of the responsible consumer, however, were reinforced from a less likely source: an upper-class culture of civic obligation. The NCL’s leaders came largely from the social elite, and its members from the at least comfortable middle class. They were part of the wider Progressive Era phenomenon of reform-minded “club women” putting their wealth, political connections, and elite educations to the task of social uplift (Lebsock 1990). The initial effort by New York’s Consumers League to publicize their White List of approved stores illustrates both its members’ class position and how easy they are to lampoon: They wrote postcards to other women in the Social Register (Wolfe 1975). The same pattern held in other cities. From Milwaukee, for example, came the report that “The strength of [our] League lies largely in the fact that its members are of the leisure class, representing the largest purchasers and the most influential women of the city” (NCL Annual Reports 1900–01:24). That class position, however, also served as a resource for cross-class activism. A particular culture of elite social responsibility legitimated certain types
of public citizenship for women and helped redirect consumption from the display of social status to the exercise of cross-class solidarity.

National Consumers’ League women were heirs to a post–Civil War tradition of elite civic responsibility. This tradition justified wealth as an expression of character and hard work, but it also imposed civic duties. By virtue of their economic prominence, the wealthy had the obligation to serve their community as leading citizens, putting narrow self-interest aside and contributing to the uplift of the city as a whole (Beckert 2001; Haydu 2008; Horowitz 1976; McCarthy 1982). These leading citizens were invariably male, but they graciously shared their responsibilities with their wives, particularly in the area of cultural philanthropy and social betterment. The mister should contribute liberally to the opera and perhaps run for political office; the missus should organize the benefits for the art museum and run the homes for orphans and fallen women (Hoffecker 1974; Vitz 1989). By the end of the nineteenth century, this philanthropic tradition was evolving toward and contributing to a wider progressive movement (Boyer 1978; Buenker 1973; McFarland 1975). Wealthy and educated young women were an important part of this shift. With their labor less needed at home and their college educations little rewarded outside of it, many turned their time and skills to social betterment. The evolution of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs is symptomatic. It had its roots in local literary clubs where elite women gathered to discuss art and fashion. Club members soon turned outward, focusing first on measures to enhance the quality of their local communities. By the early twentieth century, the General Federation of Women’s Clubs had developed into a one-million-strong organization of reform women, working to improve public education, fight government corruption, clean city streets, win the vote, and much more (American City June 1912; Meltzer 2009; Skocpol 1992; Szcygiel 2003).

Class privilege, then, did not merely endow NCL women with the money and leisure to invest in social uplift. It also provided a cultural milieu in which public activism to ameliorate social problems was a legitimate role for prominent women. And it helped keep League members’ attention focused on the connections between particular consumption goods and other social problems. Reporting on its investigations into the health risks associated with cranberries picked in New Jersey and foods manufactured in tenements in New York City, the NCL emphasized that consumers “have a vital interest (tho’ they may be still unaware of it) in the health and cleanliness of the men, women, and children” at work. Improving food safety here meant raising the wages and working conditions of employees. Characteristically, the report went on to connect the workplace to the wider national community and to stress the benefit of employees’ moral improvement. “As citizens of the Republic we have all a share of responsibility for the demoralizing surroundings of these young fellow citizens and their lost opportunity for education” (NCL Annual Report 1905–06:14–15). The economic and moral uplift of employees, then, was a matter of women’s civic as well as maternal duty.

These cross-class solidarities can be seen not only in the choice of targets for NCL benevolence, but also in the League’s efforts to broaden its social base. Annual reports and other NCL documents regularly warned that the organization must not be “a movement of the educated few.” Officers practiced what they
preached, seeking allies across class lines through overtures to the Catholic Women’s League, farmers’ Granges, and public high schools (NCL Annual Report 1902–03:6–7; Wolfe 1975). NCL leaders sought to cross lines in one other way that sets them apart from contemporary food movements. A common charge against today’s locavores, noted earlier in this article, is that the seasonal and sustainable foods they advocate are beyond the means of the less affluent and are part of a status-conscious foodie culture: one pays more for virtuous goods. League members, by contrast, tried to make a virtue of dressing down. They were advised to choose goods that were less costly but more socially beneficial than fashionable ones.

Their deliberate repudiation of upper-class tastes is clearest in discussions of the White Label scheme. The sweatshops where the most exploited women worked tended to be ones that produced low-end underwear. These cheaper cotton goods were significantly different from the finer weaves to which NCL members were accustomed. “The goods endorsed by our League are mostly of inferior quality such as do not appeal to the class of people from which we have, as yet, largely recruited our membership” (NCL Records, Reel 16, Office File, Chartered Leagues, Massachusetts, Report of Committee on Advertising, January 27, 1904). The White Label campaign, accordingly, stressed the importance of renouncing personal comfort and class standards to support poor women and children. “It required absolutely heroic self-sacrifice on the part of a refined woman to consent to use them,” the League boasted, “yet many of them did so” (NCL Annual Report 1901–02:47).

The NCL’s Josephine Goldmark attributed the greater success of the Label campaign in New England to that region’s “Puritan conscience.” That characterization points to the way in which gender ideology and class position came together to support a particular model of citizenship for women. From the prevailing system of gender inequality came women’s cultural association with consumption, their essentialized moral nature, and their lack of voting rights—all steering them toward the deliberate use of consumption choices as a form of civic engagement. Their class position, too, provided cultural blessing for public action in pursuit of social betterment. But it was not simply a matter of citizenship being steered toward responsible consumption. Because they came from privilege, because they accepted their maternal obligations, and because economic changes had shifted their responsibilities from production to consumption, NCL members saw themselves as having a positive duty to do good for the poor through their purchases. Here, too, League officials made the point through an invidious comparison to a very different kind of affluent, womanly consumer: the thoughtless shopper, driven by selfish impulse and fleeting fashion. On a whim, “the New York Society woman” might stop into department stories and snap up novelties “at a bargain price,” heedless of the implications for home- and tenement-workers (Nathan 1986 [1926]:13–14). Or they might indulge their preference for those soft and fashionable undergarments instead of the uplifting muslin ones. League meetings and pamphlets emphasized, accordingly, elite women’s ethical obligation to practice a higher form of citizenship in their consumption choices (Storrs 2000; Wiedenhoft 2002).
GENDER INEQUALITY AND CLASS PRIVILEGE AS CONSTRAINTS ON CROSS-CLASS CONSUMERISM

The boundaries of the NCL’s good citizenship crossed class lines, and Sklar (1995b) is right to argue that it achieved certain class goals through gendered politics. But it did so selectively. The gender and class cultures that included poor women and children as beneficiaries of conscientious consumerism also excluded other parts of the working class—those that were male, unionized, and not destitute. Women were included, moreover, more as objects of benevolence than as subjects to empower through union organization. The most important source of those exclusions was another facet of the NCL’s consumer citizenship, which identified ethical shoppers as a neutral public, standing apart from self-interested class actors.

The NCL’s selective cross-class consumerism can be traced in part to the organization’s extension of maternal responsibility to the public sphere. Women and children were unlikely to have unions to back them up, and they were perceived to be the most vulnerable to exploitation and “demoralizing.” Even for this subset of the working class, the League’s maternalist approach made them the objects of consumer solicitude rather than treating them as workers who could, with supportive allies, organize and stand up to employers in their own right (Frank 2003). This approach may have been realistic. Most unions at the time showed no interest in recruiting these workers, and women and children were the ones for whom protective laws could (in some states) pass legislatures and survive court review. It made strategic sense, too, for the NCL to find a niche where it would not compete directly with existing unions, overwhelmingly dominated by and catering to men (Storrs 2000:37). But when women did show that they could fight for themselves, as with the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU), the League backed off. And it did so at a time when middle-class support for union drives might have made more of those drives successful (Wolfe 1975). There was an additional tension between the NCL and the American Federation of Labor (AFL), related more to a proto-feminist than a traditionalist gender ideology. Although NCL leaders did not seek to empower female workers through unions, they did want to support them with living wages. Many of these women, after all, were single or widowed; they were hardly working for “pin money.” The principle of living wages for women, however, put the NCL at odds with the AFL’s ideal of a family wage for men, high enough to make the paid labor of women and children unnecessary. The League’s position, by contrast, was that “all workers shall receive fair living wages,” and at least some of its leaders specifically took as their guide “the wages and the standard of living of self-supporting women” (NCL Constitution 1900, emphasis added; NCL Records, Organization Files, Minutes of 1907 Annual Meeting; see also Wiedenhoft 2002:92; Wolfe 1975:386–387).

But NCL leaders clearly articulated another rationale for shunning organized labor, a rationale involving both the identity and strategy of consumer citizenship. As an identity, League members were encouraged to think of themselves as standing above and apart from the conflicting class forces of labor and capital. Several cultural associations supported this self-image. Most important was the link drawn between “the consumer” and “the public,” with this social force acting at times...
through market leverage and at times through legislation. “Ultimately, all protection for employees of whatever age depends upon the conscience of the general public. Whether shorter hours of work for women and children be gained by the voluntary acts of merchants, or by restrictions upon child labor...it is ultimately due to the conscience of the public registering in these different forms” (NCL Annual Report 1904–05:12). League officials added that the public’s conscience needed to balance out the more self-interested parties of unions and employers. “In the solving of industrial problems,” Maud Nathan (1986 [1926]:122) opined, “there must be a triple alliance. Heretofore, there have been usually but two factors considered—labour and capital. To these must be added the third—the consumer.” Florence Kelley, among other NCL leaders, hoped that this position as mediator would be institutionalized in “wage boards” proposed in some states in 1909–11 to set minimum wages in egregiously poorly paid industries like candy- and garment making. The boards would give formal representation to employees (not unions), to owners, and to the public. Under these proposals (rarely enacted), “at last it is recognized that the public is a factor in these disputes” (Kelley 1910; NCL Records, Printed Matter, Bulletins and Reports, New York City, Annual Reports of the Consumers’ League of the City of New York for 1910:13–14; NCL Records, Publications, “Minimum Wage Boards” by Florence Kelley).

Two other cultural associations reinforced this identification of the consumer as a nonpartisan force above labor and capital. One, introduced above, linked consumers and women. Women were cut off from formal partisan politics; they were seen as separated from the world of production, where labor and capital met; and they were still believed to have moral natures more elevated than those of men (Cronin 2000; Douglas 1977; Sklar 1995a). For all these reasons, women stood above the sordid fray of class conflict. A third association, more specific to Progressive Era ideology, celebrated science and expertise as a neutral force for analyzing and solving social problems (Dirks 1996). The NCL fully agreed. Addressing concerns over food adulteration, the Massachusetts chapter made it “the part of the Consumers’ League to guide the purchasing public by putting before it incontestable facts and sound reasoning” (NCL Records, Printed Matter, Bulletins and Reports, Massachusetts Consumers’ League, 8th Annual Report, 1906:6). And on all three points—the organized consumer as voice of the public, as moral womanhood, as progressive expert—NCL members affirmed their own identities as rational consumer citizens, in sharp contrast to the selfish and frivolous shopper.

As a strategy, this understanding of the consumer citizen had an obvious corollary: the NCL should not take sides between organized labor and capital. The organization repeatedly affirmed “our entirely neutral position in regard to Trades Unions” (NCL Records, Office Files, Chartered Leagues, Massachusetts, Executive Committee Minutes for May 8, 1907). Most workers, of course, did not belong to trade unions, and those most exposed to long hours and low pay deserved assistance. But even here, aid was to be rendered through the marketplace, registering “public opinion” via consumer choices rather than by supporting the organization of workers themselves. And while the target of this public pressure was the individual employer, the NCL gave no indication that it considered employers’ interests as a potential obstacle to change. Rather, businessmen were seen as being as powerless
in the face of market forces as their workers. “Any given employer is helpless to improve conditions unless sustained by public opinion, by law, and by the action of Consumers” (NCL Annual Report 1904–05: unpaginated end page). Ultimately it is not class interests but thoughtless consumers who are to blame for poor working conditions (NCL Annual Report 1903–04:21). Educated consumers, by contrast, can act, not as allies to unions, but as substitutes for unions where employees are most defenseless. The combination of an “above class” identity and a conviction that the interests of workers and employers can be harmonized by consumer opinion (not by collective bargaining) is particularly clear in Nathan’s reflections on the NCL. “We never sentimentally put the rights of the employee above the rights of the employer. We recognized that, while he must act justly and fairly to his employees, they owed him a very positive duty... We drew their attention to industrial laws and the penalties for violation, but we emphasized the necessity of their giving faithful service in return for a fair remuneration and just conditions... We tried to adjust fairly the differences between employer and employee, through the power of the third factor, the consumer” (Nathan 1986 [1926]:59).

As I explain below, NCL officials put this model of consumer citizenship to work in several areas. They did so in their rejection of labor unions’ interpretation of “consumer” action; in their open conflicts with unions; and in their eventual abandonment of labeling schemes in favor of an exclusively political strategy.

As Wiedenhoft (2002) reminds us, labor unions of the time had their own labels. Some sought to protect white workers’ jobs from firms employing Chinese labor. But the more common strategy was to label goods—beer, hand tools, shoes—made by union labor, or to blacklist goods made by businesses deemed unfair to labor. Lists of such goods routinely appeared in local and national union newspapers and might be read out at union meetings (Glickman 1997; Knight 1960). The meaning of “looking for the label,” however, was quite different for organized labor versus the NCL. For labor, buying union-labeled goods and shunning blacklisted ones was a gesture of class solidarity, an act of mutual support for fellow unionists. For NCL members, honoring the White Label was an act of cross-class assistance, a way to benefit their less fortunate sisters (Dirks 1996; Wiedenhoft 2002). The intended audiences, too, were different. Union labels were addressed to union brothers; publicizing the white and black lists was a strategy for building solidarity across the boundaries of trade and geography. For the NCL, White Labels were targeted at middle-class consumers, with the goal of educating them about labor issues and enlisting their purchasing power on the side of improved conditions.

League officials also imagined these newly educated consumers as women. The AFL’s “label leagues,” by contrast, at first excluded women altogether. Then, around 1904, the Federation launched Women’s Union Label Leagues for the wives and daughters of unionists, hoping to enlist family support for what was still a predominantly male, working-class union program (Wiedenhoft 2002). The union label, furthermore, was thought of as one weapon in a larger battle with employers. Indeed, labels and blacklists were typically introduced in connection with, or following the failure of, strikes. The NCL’s White Label, instead, was meant to marshal the power of consumers as a third force standing apart from labor and capital. Last, the two schemes had different ultimate goals. Union labels required union
recognition, and blacklists were meant to bring recalcitrant employers to the bargaining table. The League's label encouraged employers to shorten the workday and improve working conditions, but it made no reference to union wage standards, much less union recognition (Nathan 1986 [1926]). Indeed, when delegates from the Massachusetts Consumers' League (one of the most progressive state Leagues) to the founding meeting of the NCL received their instructions, it was apparently not enough to rule out union conditions as a prerequisite for the planned consumer label. The Massachusetts Executive Committee further directed delegates to "oppose anything in the Constitution limiting the National Federation to the endorsement of Trades' Union labels, or to the use, solely of Trades' Union sources of information" (NCL Records, Office File, Chartered Leagues, Massachusetts, Executive Committee Minutes for September 30, 1898, original punctuation).

Not surprisingly, these different agenda periodically led to open conflict between the NCL and unions. Leading the attack on the League was the ILGWU, which sought to organize some of the same employees that the NCL hoped to benefit. After its formation in 1900, the ILGWU developed its own label, affixed to clothes made by union labor in shops with union contracts. ILGWU officials took exception to the NCL's alternative label on the grounds that it gave a seal of approval to non-union goods made for wages below the union standard. At its 1904 convention, ILGWU delegates went so far as to declare the NCL label "dangerous to the welfare of the International" (Wolfe 1975:389). The NCL was conciliatory, up to a point. It agreed to drop its label for all garments except underwear, insisting that the latter program was crucial to its educational efforts. It agreed, as well, to withdraw the label from any firm where its use directly damaged the interests of employees. But League officials insisted that the two labels were not in conflict. The ILGWU's was for those who supported unions, they argued, while the NCL's was for conscientious consumers who did not necessarily back unions, a category that included, they believed, the majority of NCL members. Even before the debacle with the ILGWU, League president John Graham Brooks acknowledge that the NCL's neutral position put it in a bind with respect to organized labor. "To work with trade unions is to antagonize much of [the] present membership, to ignore them is to antagonize working people" (NCL Records, Office Files, Chartered Leagues, Massachusetts, Executive Committee Minutes for June 5, 1901; see also Dirks 1996; Wolfe 1975).

Ultimately the terms of the truce between the NCL and the ILGWU proved unacceptable to AFL unions, and by 1918, the League had entirely dropped its labeling schemes and turned to exclusively political strategies. There are several reasons for the shift. One is that the NCL and its allies were making progress in winning protective legislation for women and child labor. Another is that during the war, the federal government mandated minimum standards. But union opposition also played a role, confirming the limits of the NCL's brand of political consumerism. Given its understanding of the consumer citizen, the NCL could not use labeling schemes to improve working conditions without running afoul of organized

4 Although women like Florence Kelley ran the NCL, it had male presidents in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
labor. That conflict came to a head, and the NFL finally abandoned labels, during World War I. The AFL strongly objected to the continued use of NCL labels by manufacturers during union-led strikes. League officials conceded that they could not effectively monitor conditions at firms selling NCL-labeled goods. More importantly, they recognized that “we have no way of knowing when manufacturers who use our label have first rejected the request of a union to have its label adopted” (NCL Records, Organization Files, Memorandum on the Label, February 14, 1918). Rather than making union conditions a requirement for the NCL’s label, however, the League abandoned consumer labeling altogether.

There is a historical irony in the timing of the NCL’s turn away from consumer strategies. It came at a rare moment of trade union power in U.S. history (Dubofsky 1994). That moment of relative balance between labor and capital was also the one setting in which the League’s identity as an organization of consumers above class, and its strategy of pursuing change through the market, might not have amounted in practice to deferring to capital. The situation was quite different for the rest of the period examined here. A wave of union organizing around the turn of the century had been checked and, in most industries, beaten back by a powerful employer counteroffensive. Part of that counteroffensive, moreover, involved the introduction of welfare measures within firms as an alternative to unions (McQuaid 1986; Tone 1997). Under these conditions, the NCL label not only failed to empower workers, but it also complemented welfare capitalism by providing another fig leaf for open shops—an industrial relations precedent for “green washing.”

CONCLUSION

My primary goal has been to show how a particular way of thinking about the identities and responsibilities of shoppers, a model of consumer citizenship, structured the boundaries of NCL consumer activism. Compared with two usual suspects in accounts of class bias in contemporary political consumerism—the economic resources and cultural capital of relatively privileged shoppers—that model of consumer citizenship better explains how the NCL used conscientious shopping to cross class lines in some ways and not others. NCL members also put front and center the relationship between the commodities they favored and the labor that went into them. This contrasts sharply with the emphasis many contemporary supporters of alternative and sustainable agriculture place on the relationship between favored products and either aesthetic or environmental virtues. And even when improved wages and working conditions were not the primary goal of NCL campaigns, as in its pursuit of pure food, the organization insisted that the problem (of food safety, in this case) could not be solved without improvements in the workplace. The same model of citizenship that supported this agenda, however, also ruled out cooperation with labor unions in consumer campaigns, and the benefits the NCL sought for exploited workers never included the right to organize on their own behalf.

This pattern can be seen both as an example of boundary work in social movements and as an application of scholarship on that topic to consumer movements in
particular. Social movement scholars have shown how activists’ framing of issues and identities at stake in a struggle can shape alliances (Carroll and Ratner 1996; Gerhards and Rucht 1992). And sociologists like Ganz (2009), Mische (2008), and Polletta (2002) have documented the possibility of these framings being imported from other social arenas (the civil rights movement for farmworkers, professional associations for student radicals, religious fellowship for civil rights activists), redrawing the lines along which solidarity does, or does not, hold. In the NCL, too, the sense of obligation to poorer women and children, the strategy of social uplift through educated consumerism, the ideal of the consumer as neutral arbiter of class conflict, all transposed to consumer politics cultural assumptions based in gender inequalities and elite social circles of the day. And to the extent that these assumptions motivated and legitimated women’s public activism, the NCL case is also a reminder that stigmatized and privileged identities alike can, under suitable conditions, become resources for social change. This argument cuts both ways, however. What can empower actors at some times and for some tasks can turn against them when circumstances and tasks change. The ethnic culture that helped the United Farm Workers mobilize farmworkers and build alliances with civil rights activists proved less effective in running a union bureaucracy over time. The model of personal friendship that made participatory democracy workable in the early women’s movement also made the assimilation of new members more difficult (Ganz 2009; Polletta 2002). The NCL’s cultural models of maternalist care and above-class consumer citizenship helped mobilize women for activism and probably benefited some particularly disadvantaged workers. But these models also narrowed the beneficiaries of the League’s good works and put the organization at odds with organized labor, an ally that could have used their support.

In comparative perspective, that turning away from organized labor matters. Consumer-based strategies for improving working conditions seem to have been more common in the United States than in Western Europe (Chatriot, Chessel, and Hilton 2006; Daunton and Hilton 2001). One reason is that employees elsewhere have commonly won benefits and rights through strong unions and social democratic politics. With the partial exception of the New Deal years, most U.S. employees have had neither, and unions themselves have often resorted to consumer boycotts and blacklists after failed organizing drives and lost strikes. The long-running literature on American exceptionalism tries to explain this contrast, and one theme in that literature is especially relevant here. Organized labor in the United States has confronted unusually militant opposition from employers, and particularly in the critical decades on either side of 1900, the middle class has more often sided with business than with unions (Gerber 1997; Kirk 1994). That comparative context suggests both why the NCL’s consumer strategies won more support than did their counterparts in Western Europe, and why the refusal of this progressive middle-class organization to ally with organized labor mattered.

In other respects, the NCL’s insistence that conscientious consumers needed to attend to and support workers is an important example to hold up to contemporary political consumers. I have stressed the origins of that cross-class solicitude in a model of consumer citizenship, one with roots in the gender and class cultures of the day. These historically specific cultural resources are no longer available to
today's ethical consumers. But the latter might be seen as applying the more general lesson, that different ways of understanding the identities and responsibilities of consumer citizens can reshape movement boundaries. Food reformers today are well aware that they have a class problem—that their recipes for sustainable local agriculture, and their strategies for advancing it through their purchasing choices, often take farmworkers out of the picture and offer little to low-income consumers. One way in which some of them have sought to reduce class bias is precisely by re-framing consumer citizenship. Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi (2010) make the case for thinking in terms of food justice, so as to highlight the labor as well as environmental implications of change in the food system. Micheletti and Stolle (2012) have advanced the notion of “sustainable citizenship,” calling on consumers to take responsibility for social as well as environmental injustices. The challenge will be to find the cultural resources, comparable to those available to the NCL, to support these more inclusive models of consumer citizenship.

REFERENCES


General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC). N.d. The Club Woman. Boston, MA: GFWC.


Copyright of Sociological Forum is the property of Wiley-Blackwell and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.