Shopping FOR CHANGE

Consumer Activism and the Possibilities of Purchasing Power

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Shopping for Change

LOUIS HYMAN and JOSEPH TOHILL

THE GREAT RECESSION reminded us that while we are all part of the economy we do not share in that economy equally. If before 2008 the two numbers that represented capitalism were the GDP and the Dow, then after 2008, thanks to the Occupy Wall Street movement, those two numbers are now the 1 percent and the 99 percent. Occupy Wall Street did not stop Wall Street's excesses. Even now, years later, after the stock market has recovered and GDP growth has returned, inequality still haunts our debates—and our economy. Yet Occupy did change our views of what a successful and more equitable economy could look like. If the Occupy movement accomplished anything, it was to reawaken our sense that change was, and *is*, possible.

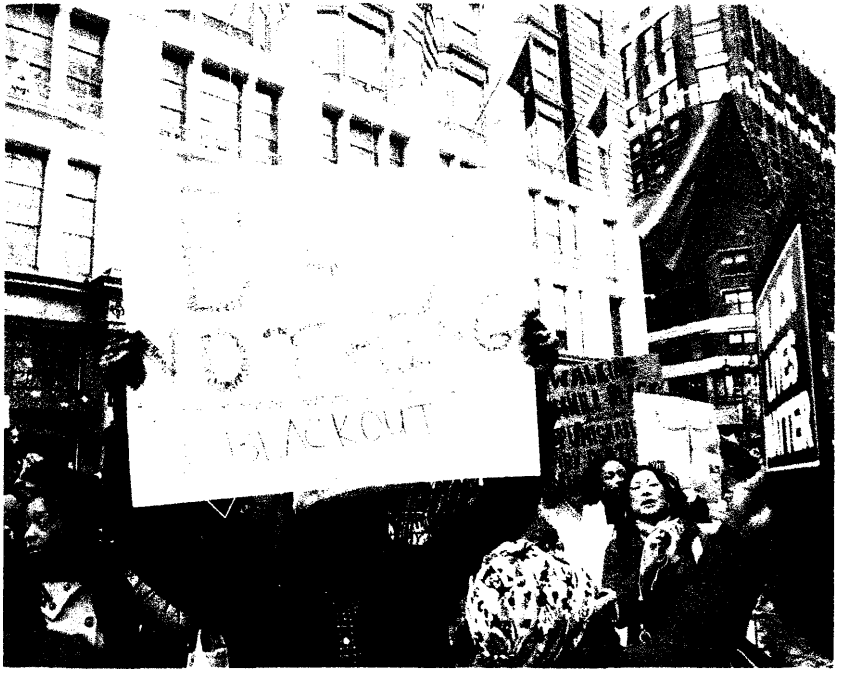
The language of Occupy originated with the academic work of the then-obscure economist Thomas Piketty, but it was academics and activists working together that made this key shift in our understanding of capitalism possible.[1] Tellingly, it is the numbers highlighted by Occupy—the 1 percent and the 99 percent—that have articulated our post-recession political consciousness. Income and how we spend it defines our radical imagination today. Even though the brief surge of Occupy appeared to come to an end when police forces swept the occupiers from the streets of cities across North America and around the world in the winter of 2011–12, the new attention to power and inequality remains alive in contemporary

social movements and activism from Strike Debt to Black Lives Matter, from the Fight for $15 and Fairness to Idle No More.

While we could easily think of shopping as disconnected from the rest of our economic lives, the freedom of choice we experience in stores is inextricably connected to the lack of choice in the workplace and, increasingly, in politics. Our contemporary understanding of economic inequality—also known as class difference (something most North Americans like to pretend does not apply to them)—is articulated less by our work than by our consumption. Class, in this post-recession world, is defined more by the power to consume than by the power to produce. Whether "false consciousness" or not, this experience of class as consumption fundamentally drives our politics today.

Every day we make decisions about how to spend our money, and, for the socially conscious, we want these decisions to matter. Consuming with a conscience—using individual and collective purchasing power for political ends—is among the fastest growing forms of political participation worldwide. The most common form of consumer activism, the boycott, involves collectively shunning goods and services produced or sold by particular firms, industries, nation-states, or (on occasion) ethnic groups. Another common activity is the buycott, through which activists encourage the consumption of particular goods or brands for moral, ethical, or political reasons. Such "political consumerism" (as political scientists label it) or "consumer activism" (historians' preferred term) is premised on a belief that consumption is an inherently political act embedded in a complex web of economic and social relations. This belief establishes both a framework and a prescription for grassroots collective action that makes use of the buying power of consumers to change market, business, or government practices or policies that activists find politically, ethically, or environmentally unacceptable. Recognizing the connections between our consumer choices and other issues—labour rights, civil rights, corporate behaviour, the environment, and human rights—consumer activists practise a form of long-distance solidarity that links them not only to like-minded consumers but also to distant workers, employers, environments, and nations.[2] And so, political consumers, as contributors to this collection tell us, "buy green" for the environment or "buy pink" to combat breast cancer. They boycott Taco Bell to support migrant workers or Burger King to save the rainforest.

It is easy to imagine that such politicized consumption is new, that in the past social justice movements, especially those concerned with economic



Black Lives Matter activists protest in front of Macy's flagship department store in New York City in November 2015, encouraging a boycott of Black Friday consumerism in solidarity with Ferguson, MO, where a police officer shot and killed an unarmed black teenager, Michael Brown. Photo by The All-Nite Images licensed under CC BY 2.0, www.flickr.com.

inequality, rested solely on workplace or racial and ethnic solidarities. After all, in our history classes we learn, for example, (sometimes a little, sometimes a lot) about the unions and strikes that empowered workers in an industrializing economy or the civil rights movements that empowered peoples of African, Latino, or Native descent. In activist circles, we valorize labour's radical past and the mid-twentieth century labour victories that helped usher in an unprecedented and prolonged period of decreased inequality following the Second World War. But this is a past that seems to have little to do with shopping, a past that regards purchasing power as the reward of all that labour struggle. (Hoorah postwar appliances!)

In the last few decades, inequality has resurged in both countries as unfettered global capitalism has driven capital—and with it well-paid, stable jobs—offshore, into free trade zones in the Global South. Inequality has risen faster in the United States, where the rise of neoliberalism and the decline of private sector unions has been more pronounced, and the effects of deindustrialization have been less cushioned by a widespread

social safety net, including a universal, single-payer health care system.[3] At the same time, the increasing globalization of supply chains has distanced consumers even further from the production of goods they continue to consume in (over)abundance. Understandably, then, today's activists are looking for new ways to promote economic and social justice, both at home and abroad. Politicizing consumption can seem like a completely new way to accomplish old goals, with untapped possibilities.

Historians, as this volume shows, can offer some guidance, since this "consumer history" is far older than most of us realize. While the histories of other twentieth-century social movements are celebrated in activist circles, where they provide a basis for future strategy, a comparable consumer history is not. Among professional historians, consumer history is a growing but niche field, but for activists, it may as well not exist. Quite simply, they don't know their history. Instead of seeing themselves as the inheritors of a continuous political tradition stretching back to at least the eighteenth century, historian Lawrence Glickman insightfully notes, members of each new generation of consumer activists think of themselves as "political pioneers." The consumer movement is notable for "the relative absence of memory and myth that usually characterize social movements."[4]

Without knowing our history, it is difficult, if not impossible, to acquire the depth of experiences necessary to think through what is truly new (and what is not) about today's challenges. In thinking about what will work and what won't, reason alone can never be enough. We can easily convince ourselves of scenarios. Only through experience can we separate the useful strategies from the failures. Reinventing past failed strategies is a waste of time. History can help us. We hope, in this volume, to bring together these two worlds—history and activism—so that today's consumer activists may draw on the lessons of a useable past.

The broad-based transnational consumer movement that arose in the early to mid-twentieth century, leading scholars in the field persuasively argue, constitutes a social movement that deserves a place alongside the stories of modern social movements. If a social movement can be defined as a loose coalition of groups and organizations with common goals that are oriented toward mass action and popular participation and that share the intention of influencing major societal institutions or groups, then the consumer movement certainly counts as one. Generally reformist rather than revolutionary, modern consumer movements have mobilized

millions of North Americans, captured (at times) the attention and imagination of the broader consuming public, greatly influenced government policies and business practices, and consistently put forward a vision of our societies and economies based on participation, access, and fairness.[5]

Moreover, forms of consumer activism—from boycotts to buycotts—have often been central to the most important struggles for social justice, like abolitionism, anti–child labour activism, civil rights, trade unionism, and anti-globalization. The Occupy movement was, after all, ignited by Adbusters, the Canadian-based radical anti-consumerist, culture-jamming organization that brought us "Buy Nothing Day," which has since 1992 encouraged consumers around the world to reconsider the devastating impact of rampant consumerism on the planet. Acts of consumer resistance in North America have a long and storied history, which stretches back to the earliest days of consumer society (tea, anyone?). Some of the most successful political struggles in history, from the American Revolution to Abolitionism, to the civil rights movement, have articulated their politics by a refusal to shop, even though their successful boycotts "have not always been understood as victories for consumer activism."[6]

Whatever their cause, consumer activists see themselves as agents of reform. Waves of consumer activism most often arise to address perceived failures in the market—or governance over the market. Political consumerism inherently involves attempts to restructure the political community, expand venues of citizens' engagement and participation in political life, and explicitly turn ordinarily private, seemingly apolitical, even conservative actions like shopping into forms of political engagement that combine self-interest and the general welfare.[7]

As so many of our contributors illustrate, consumer activism, as a form of political participation outside of the realm of traditional or formal politics, has opened up new arenas for citizen participation in public life. In fact, it calls into question the public/private divide that ordinarily defines what constitutes political participation because it recognizes seemingly nonpolitical or private arenas (such as the home or the store) as venues for political action. The traditional gender division of labour in capitalist societies has made consumer activism an important form of political participation for women, in particular, in North America and elsewhere. As a relatively low-risk political activity with a low threshold for participation (sometimes literally buying nothing), it has also appealed to oppressed groups and those marginalized by traditional political systems and voting, such as

African Americans denied the vote in the Southern United States under Jim Crow.[8] For those at the margins, shopping can be a radical activity.

All of these examples would appear to make consumer activism an ideal way to conduct activist politics. Organized and politicized consumption can exert real pressure on the powerful. In theory, this all makes sense. But, despite these advantages, movements of consumers have some serious drawbacks and pitfalls that other forms of organizing do not necessarily share. In recent years, some forms of political consumerism, such as fair trade, have faced criticism as projects of Northern consumer societies that undermine Southern economies and cultures as much as they do market-driven globalization, and that ignore voices from the Global South. Other critics argue that shopping for change is too neoliberal-friendly and cannot fundamentally change corporate practices. They argue that it directs attention away from the necessary role of the state in regulating capitalism and instead encourages corporate co-optation of consumerist goals, leading to such ethically dubious practices as "pinkwashing" and "astroturfing."[9] As "commodity activism" has come under fire in recent years for such practices as "celebrity humanitarianism" and, more generally, for grafting "philanthropy and social action onto merchandising practices, market incentives, and corporate profits," the effectiveness of consumer activism has been an important topic of debate among social movement activists and academics.[10] Many remain sceptical. As we discovered when putting together this collection, some consumer activists view the idea of "shopping for change" as thoroughly co-opted by corporations and corporate philanthropies. One activist author who we emailed about writing a chapter for this volume returned a terse rejection of the idea based on the misperception that our proposed title, *Shopping for Change*, represented everything she was fighting against!

Moreover, consuming (or not) tends to reaffirm the moral foundations of consumer capitalism as a whole. Consumer choice, a seemingly apolitical and inherently positive concept, is in fact a conservative value deeply embedded in the heart of capitalism. The right to buy or not to buy reaffirms the central tenet of the market—money speaks loudest. Choice is also one of the fundamental differences between consumer politics and, for example, worker politics. At the end of the day, consumers always have a choice to buy (or not), while workers always need a paycheque, and consumption is much more diffuse (all those shops) than production (just one workplace). Going on strike, for a worker, is always harder and involves more sacrifice than a buyer giving up a particular good. Although

civil rights movements and other social justice causes have harnessed this conservative idea (choice) for progressive ends, its use nonetheless risks re-legitimizing economic inequality. Those with the means to consume, with the ability to buy, inherently have more power than those who don't. Boycotts and buycotts only work if consumers have sufficient purchasing power to withhold or to wield. Consumer power, while often a powerful tool for redressing social inequality, does not naturally lend itself to redressing economic inequality.

Furthermore, consumer activism can as easily be harnessed by reactionary movements seeking to reinforce inequality as it can by movements of the left that use it to fight inequality and injustice. In the North American context, for instance, some labour organizations in the late nineteenth century organized boycotts of Asian businesses. The 1920s and 1930s witnessed boycotts of Jewish businesses, driven by anti-Semitic and fascist-sympathizing organizations. In Canada, the "achat chez nous" movement, organized by French-Canadian nationalists, urged French-speaking Quebecers to boycott Jewish businesses. Americans were urged to do the same in the "Buy Christian" campaign promoted by the Christian Front and Father Charles Coughlin, the right-wing populist radio sensation whose infamous anti-Semitic rants reached a weekly audience of millions. These examples of "conservative consumerism" (though they are not ones we are concerned with in this work) caution against overstating the affinity between consumer activism and social justice.[11]

Fostering the consumer consciousness necessary for sustained social activism is another key challenge. While other movements have had relatively stable, definable identities and constituencies at their core, the consumer movement rarely has. When you ask someone who they are, rarely do they volunteer, "I am a Consumer!" At the workplace, you think of yourself as a worker and have friends who are the same. As someone from a marginalized group, you experience that identity every day, especially if you leave your community. This experience of identity—both as an individual and as part of a collective—has been foundational for all social movements and is often missing in consumer politics. Moreover, the "consumer interest" risks being so diffuse as to lose all value. If everyone is a consumer, then for whom does the movement speak? Being a consumer is more often a social practice than a social identity. So while African American rights' activists boycotted buses and occupied Woolworth's lunch counters to ignite the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, their struggle was (understandably) cast as civil rights rather than consumer rights.

Given the conservative nature of consumer choice and the relatively weak pull of consumer identity, turning good intentions into effective action is another challenge. An intention-action gap exists between what consumers say they believe and how they shop. While about 30 percent of people claim to care about how goods are made, for instance, ethically produced goods rarely capture more than a 3 percent market share.[12]

And yet, North American consumer activists, as several of the contributors to this volume demonstrate, have "made a difference" and continue to do so—in spite of the inherent weakness of consumer activism and frequent failures. In recent years, consumer historians have challenged the old socialist critique of the rise of consumer capitalism as an inherently conservative force and demonstrated in historical terms what political scientists, sociologists, and others (including the contributors to this collection) have shown of contemporary political consumerism: consumption can empower. Figuring out how and in what circumstances consumer activism has succeeded, what has worked and what has not, what should be emulated and what should be avoided—these are among the goals of *Shopping for Change*.[13]

Re-establishing a useable history is essential to the success of today's consumer activism. By building on a burgeoning international literature that documents the breadth and importance of consumer activism in both past and present, *Shopping for Change* seeks, by highlighting the possibilities and pitfalls of political consumerism, to contribute to efforts to address inequality and promote social justice. The American contributions to this literature are now considerable. The most important single work is Lawrence Glickman's *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America*, which spans the late eighteenth through to the twenty-first century. A similar overview of political consumerism in Canadian history has yet to be written, and there are comparatively fewer published studies of the extent and impact of Canadian consumer activism. Although most of the contributions to this volume, with one or two notable exceptions, remain rooted in national historiographies, we believe bringing them together in one volume emphasizes consumer activism as a phenomenon that transcends international boundaries.[14]

In making a contribution to reclaiming the history of consumer activism, *Shopping for Change* also seeks to overcome the almost engrained hesitancy of historians to bring their stories right up to the present. Glickman's otherwise comprehensive opus, for example, devotes less than 8 of its 310 pages to the period after 1980, despite suggesting (rightly, we think) that

this was a period during which "consumer activism has flourished as never before."[15] Thus, our book contains almost as many chapters on what historians might call the "contemporary history" of political consumerism, including twenty-first-century campaigns.

This volume came from a desire to think about how shopping for change helped to remake a more just society in the past and how it can continue to do so today. Can we overcome the limitations of consumer identity, the conservative pull of consumer choice, and other pitfalls of consumer activism to marshal the possibilities of consumer power? Can we, quite literally, shop for change? This is the question that *Shopping for Change* attempts to answer. Taken together, our contributors answer with a qualified "yes." The authors of the volume share a broad commitment to thinking critically about the limits and possibilities of consumer activism, in both its past and present manifestations. *Shopping for Change*, then, brings together the historical and contemporary perspectives of both academics and activists to provide a rapid introduction into what has been possible before and what we think is possible now so that we can, together, make a more just tomorrow.

* * *

Economic practices and transnational capitalism can seem too large to be affected by consumers and shopping. Consumer activism, while potentially powerful, cannot alone solve the problems of inequality. Yet in the past, consumer activism has undermined the most powerful forces in our society, like imperialism and slavery. Even before the tactic got a name in the 1880s, the "boycott" was central to consumer activism. "Non-importation" and "non-consumption" movements played a key role in the American Revolution. A similar *Patriote* boycott during the unsuccessful Rebellions of 1837 and 1838 in Lower Canada (modern-day Quebec) drew inspiration from the American boycotts seven decades earlier.[16]

As our first two contributors demonstrate, consumer boycotts were key tactics of nineteenth-century American social movements. In "Consuming with a Conscience," Michelle Craig McDonald looks at how abolitionists in the mid-nineteenth century marshalled purchasing power to undermine American slavery by boycotting southern cotton and selling only "free produce." By the end of the century, the American labour movement and its allies in the National Consumers League, an organization of primarily middle-class women, had made boycotts and what would later

be called "buycotts" key strategies in the fight to curb the abuses of industrial capitalism. Wendy Wiedenhoft Murphy, in "Boycotts, Buycotts, and Legislation," reminds us of the difficulties, and possibilities, of cross-class consumer legislation through her study of Progressive Era reform.

Mounting alarm over the rising cost of living in early twentieth-century North America, particularly during and immediately following the First World War, was central to the emergence of a self-conscious, politically oriented consumer movement in both the United States and Canada. The rise of the consumer movement was characterized by widespread consumer consciousness, the increasing view of the consumer as citizen, and the identification of a distinct "consumer interest." What distinguished the consumer politics of the twentieth century from that of earlier eras, not only in the United States but in Canada, Britain, and other countries that were transitioning into modern consumer societies, was the "emphasis on consumers themselves as the beneficiaries of political activism" and the emergence of groups dedicated to representing, defending, and lobbying the state to protect "the consumer." Concern over prices and purchasing power were central to the emergence of consumer consciousness and the development of the idea that there was an identifiable "consumer interest" that was in need of protection. This idea, in turn, became a foundational premise of the consumer movements that emerged in numerous countries around the world throughout the twentieth century.[17] Whether this newly identified consumer interest was allied to or in competition with the interests of labour, whose unceasing and understandable demands for higher wages tended to contribute to rising prices, remained an open question. Inflation galvanized political activism on behalf of the consumer, leading the press, social reformers, labour leaders, and women's and newly created consumer groups to advocate for government action.

Grassroots campaigns against rising prices added weight to demands for action. Dispersed and usually short-lived groups of primarily working- and middle-class women formed in response to what they considered particularly egregious cases of price gouging in meat, milk, and other staples and launched localized food and "cost-of-living" protests and boycotts. Bettina Liverant's contribution to this book, "Making a Market for Consumers," examines one such local effort in Western Canada following the First World War, that of the Calgary Consumers League to create a public market with affordable food to help working people make the most of limited budgets. As Mark Robbins explains in his chapter, munici-

pal market campaigns were also among the tactics pursued south of the border by new white-collar consumer activists, who blamed both wealthy "profiteers" and striking workers for inflating prices at the expense of the "the public," boldly redefined as middle-class. Robbins's "Making a Middle-Class 'Public'" explains how we all began to think of ourselves as middle-class consumers and what this has meant for progressive politics.

During the Great Depression, municipalities all over North America experimented with ways to both stimulate consumer spending and keep the few spending dollars local. But, as Allison Ward shows us in her study of one Canadian city, "You Are Purchasing Prosperity!," solving local economic problems was not as simple as raising consumer awareness of the need to buy local, especially when those economic problems were part of a much larger international downturn. Nor did alternative currencies prove a cure-all for local economic woes, as Sarah Elvins shows in "Making Money in Hard Times," which examines efforts of American cities to stimulate consumer demand by injecting new currencies into struggling local economies. As it turns out, creating your own cash is not as easy as just printing it.

Hard times also fostered an explosion of consumer activism, which had begun before the onset of the Great Depression with the publication of explosive, best-selling exposés of corporate capitalism and advertising, such as *100,000,000 Guinea Pigs* and *Your Money's Worth*. The burgeoning consumer movement of the 1930s responded to the efforts of increasingly sophisticated corporate advertisers to target new markets by making protecting consumers from unscrupulous advertising and other corporate practices a key focus of its activism. In "Protecting the 'Guinea Pig Children,'" Kyle Asquith reminds us that advertising to children—the youngest and most vulnerable consumers—has long been a profitable market, but we have been able to control what advertisers can and can't do.

The economic and political ferment caused by the Great Depression and the Second World War spurred many creative efforts to channel consumer purchasing power for a variety of explicitly political ends to promote social justice at home and abroad. Josh Carreiro's "Our Economic Way Out" traces the history of "buy black" co-operative stores that flourished during the 1930s across America, illustrating the successes and failures of trying to create a truly alternative black capitalism. American Jewish-led boycotts of Nazi German products, Jeffrey Scott Demsky and Randall Kaufman argue in "Not Buying It," helped undermine Hitler's regime and bring the United States into the Second World War.

As a number of the contributors to this book show, women were both vital organizers and the shock troops of the militant consumers' organizations that proliferated in the 1930s and 1940s. The explicit "social movement consumerism" of this era was embodied in the slogan of the League of Women Shoppers, one of the most prominent American organizations of the late 1930s: "Use your buying power for justice!" Julie Guard argues in "Canada's Citizen Housewives" that politicians of this era underestimated at their own peril organized housewives who drew on their authority as mothers to demand a stronger welfare state.

Perhaps even more than the Great Depression, the Second World War fostered a consumerist vision of a more just economy because of the extent to which interventionist government came to permeate the day-to-day lives of North Americans in unprecedented and transformative ways. Through rationing, price control, and other controls on consumption, the power of the wartime state firmly backed an economy of access to "fair shares" and a decent standard of living. Joseph Tohill's "The Consumer Goes to War" compares the efforts of politically well-placed consumer activists on both sides of the border to use the war effort to mobilize consumers, particularly women, and incorporate them into the state in order to give them a key say in running the economy. However, by the end of the 1940s, both Guard and Tohill suggest, the most militant consumer groups and their radical consumerist visions were laid low by the anticommunist backlash of the early Cold War.

Red-baiting of activist consumers and organizations by powerful business lobbies and their allies in government was an important reason for the seeming quiescence of the consumer front during the 1950s. The lack of consumer activism during this decade, however, can easily be overstated, as these trough years of the consumer movement were also years that laid the groundwork for an explosion of activism in North America and elsewhere in the following decade. The cultural and political ferment of the 1960s contributed to a marked upsurge of activism and a revival of the consumer movement as a popular social movement. President John F. Kennedy's 1962 declaration of a "Consumers' Bill of Rights" helped catalyze the upsurge in both countries, as did the writing of Vance Packard and Ralph Nader.[18]

Important continuities existed in terms of personnel and organizations between the 1960s revival and the earlier era of consumer activism. In the United States, some of the presidential consumer advisers appointed by Kennedy and his successor, Lyndon Johnson, had been active in the

consumer movement's earlier heyday during the Depression and war. In "From the Great Society to Giant," Lawrence Black explores the complicated political life of one of these presidential advisors, consumer advocate Esther Peterson, as she balanced government policy roles with private work for corporations.

The flourishing of consumer activism in the 1960s and 1970s also led to the creation of important consumer regulatory agencies and considerable representation of consumers in government. On both sides of the border, consumer activists revived the demands of progressives from the interwar and war years for a cabinet-level department of the consumer. In Canada, consumer activists, led by the Consumers' Association of Canada, won a partial victory in the creation of the federal Department of Consumer and Corporate Affairs, though ultimately the awkward pairing of consumer and corporate interests within a single department led (as consumer activists feared it would) to the subordination of the former to the latter. In the United States, influential muckraking consumerist Ralph Nader spearheaded a decade-long campaign for the creation of a federal Consumer Protection Agency (CPA) from the late 1960s to the late 1970s. But a rising conservative backlash against political consumerism and the liberalism associated with it, closely tied to a well-funded and skilful anti-CPA lobbying campaign by business organizations, gradually undermined congressional and public support. By 1978, supporters of the CPA abandoned their campaign as unwinnable, a failure that sped the decline (again) of the consumer movement.[19]

The neoliberal agenda adopted in North America as well as internationally by the 1980s led to political defeats and a general decline in and fracturing of consumer movements not only in North America but also across the globe.[20] Yet somewhat paradoxically despite the consumer movement's decline at the end of the twentieth century, consumer activism continued to grow, taking on new tactics and goals, as well as revisiting the tried and true. The rise of green consumerism is among the prominent developments over the past few decades. Philip A. Wight's "The Countercultural Roots of Green Consumerism" helps us see that today's eco-friendly consumerism is more than a fad, but has resulted rather from decades of activism aimed at bringing about a synthesis of shopping and environmentalism. The difficulty of actually shopping for a better world is highlighted by H. Louise Davis's "Purchasing Change," which explores the unintended consequences of the enthusiasm for "green" alternatives like biofuels. The first-world use of biofuel, Davis suggests, doesn't particularly

help the environment, but it *does* drive up the price of food in the developing world.

The shortcomings of buying our way to a greener world provide but one example of the pitfalls of shopping for change. Our writers also unmask the ways that corporations have turned our willingness to shop for a cause to their advantage. Cause-related marketing, Mara Einstein tells us in "Buying a Better World," has certainly helped sell high-end goods to women but has had a more uncertain benefit for charities. Drawing on a wealth of evidence, including both American and Canadian health studies, "What about the Cause?," Daniel Faber, Amy Lubitow, and Madeline Brambilla's exploration of "pinkwashing," reveals the even more unprincipled use of cancer-related marketing to sell cosmetics, some of which are actually carcinogenic! Another ethically dubious corporate practice—"astroturfing" or corporate seeding of faux-grassroots lobbying groups—is the subject of Bart Elmore's "The Making of a Coke CAN." Elmore explains how Coca-Cola created its own "civic action network" to compensate for the loss of political support it had formerly received from Main Street America before aggressive consolidation of its supply chain put most small-town bottling operations out of business.

Efforts to organize consumers and workers along the increasingly convoluted supply chains that have driven the globalization of capitalism and rising corporate profit margins for the last forty years are the subject of many of the essays in this book. Modern supply chain capitalism, in which the world of production is hidden from consumers, obscures local, national, and global inequalities. Yet several of our authors show how real world campaigns have succeeded. In "Boot the Bell," Dawson Barrett explains how farm workers connected with student activists to successfully pressure Taco Bell for better wages for its suppliers. Katrina Lacher's "Where's the Beef . . . From?" shows how activists educated Americans that their delicious Burger King Whoppers were destroying the rainforest—and what could be done to stop it. In "The Sweatshop Effect," Meredith Katz examines one of the most successful examples of consumer activism in recent decades. Drawing on her own experience as co-founder and former president of United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) at Virginia Tech, Katz relates how student activists pressured Nike to improve its sweatshop conditions overseas, if it wanted to sell on campus. (Now on the faculty of Virginia Commonwealth University, Katz serves as faculty advisor for the university's recently formed USAS chapter. In

that capacity, she recently contributed her knowledge to the chapter's successful campaign modelled on previous USAS wins.)

Nevertheless, Jessica Stewart, in "Hating Wal-Mart, Loving Target," highlights the continued difficulty would-be consumer activists face in sorting out the good from the bad in supply chain capitalism and that they don't always get it right. She explains why American liberals who would never shop at Wal-Mart fawn over Target—even though the suppliers are the same and, in most cases, the labour conditions are worse at Target. (The recent untimely demise of Target's foray into Canada has left Canadian consumer activists with only a single target (pun intended) for their fear and loathing.) Louis Hyman suggests that attempting to boycott juggernauts like Wal-Mart is missing the mark anyway. He argues for a radical rethinking of how activists concerned about supply chain capitalism can maximize their impact. His "Ports are the New Factories" instead lays out a strategy to disable the container ports that make supply chain capitalism possible.

Robert Mayer and Larry Kirsch return to the theme of the importance of coalition building highlighted early in this volume by Wendy Murphy. In "To Speak in One Voice," a thorough examination of the two-year campaign for the passage of the Dodd–Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, we learn how difficult it continues to be to make meaningful political and economic reforms and regulate business in the consumer interest in the United States, even in the wake of the Great Recession. Yet Mayer and Kirsch demonstrate that, while forming political coalitions for change is difficult, it can be done, even in our neoliberal age.

Our final contributor, Tracey Deutsch, reflects on the history of shopping for change by tracing the history of the idea of demand, revealing that its assumptions are both historical and political. In "On Demand," she shows us how neoliberal thinkers contributed to the depoliticization of consumption through their efforts to reshape our ideas about consumer demand. Deutsch highlights the meaning of these intellectual trends for contemporary politics of consumption, pointing to the need to recapture an older vision of consumption and retail spaces (as she puts it "as sites of everyday struggle—places full of politics, resistance, and possibility").

In *Shopping for Change*, we hope you will see that consumers have power, though they often lack awareness of how to exercise it and do so imperfectly or incompletely. Political consumerism—such a powerful tool for reform—is alive with potential, but also vexed by snares. We think

it needs to be better understood, by both academics and activists. Creating a history of consumer activism and thinking through the strategic possibilities for today are necessary to create effective movements for social justice.

1

CONSUMING WITH A CONSCIENCE

The Free Produce Movement in Early America

MICHELLE CRAIG McDONALD

In 1838, the Anti-Slavery Society of Newcastle, England, issued a clarion call to United States cotton growers. In a pamphlet tellingly entitled *Conscience versus Cotton*, it argued that the surest route to abolition was "a wide-spreading and thoughtful conviction, that the unnecessary purchase of one iota of slave labour produce, involved the purchaser in the guilt of the Slaveholder." This was not to suggest that slaveholders escaped accountability. Indeed, Newcastle's authors reserved "well-merited scorn and indignant execration" for enslavers' actions. But it does imply that abolitionists recognized such castigations fell largely on deaf ears. While a few planters saw the error of their ways and recanted—some even becoming powerful symbols for antislavery activism—the majority remained committed to their chosen form of labour. As debates over abolition intensified, proponents changed direction, shifting from production to consumption and asking "every righteous man and every modest woman" to consider, "what can I do to put down slavery?"[1]

Most scholars, except the few who highlight Revolutionary-era boycotts like those on tea, consider consumer politics to be a modern phenomenon, but such activism was the principal tactic of the free produce movement that emerged on both sides of the Atlantic during the

early nineteenth century.[2] An effort initially dominated by Quaker and free black abolitionists, the free produce movement encouraged consumers to avoid slave-made goods—like Caribbean tropical commodities and American cotton—in favour of those harvested or manufactured by free workers. Historians have considered both the moral and economic motivations for abolition, but less often how they were intertwined. Such issues were inseparable for the free produce advocates who emerged in the United States in the 1820s and consciously modelled themselves after British antislavery sugar boycotters of the 1790s. These men and women believed that foregoing slave-made goods was only the first step in combating the institution of chattel bondage; offering a free labour alternative was essential to ensuring slavery's downfall. Fortunately, for those British buyers who wished to buy according to their conscience, help was readily at hand. "Already under the guarantee of the Philadelphia Free Produce Association," *Conscience versus Cotton* concluded, "some of this free cotton has been shipped directly to Liverpool."[3]

Historians have been less impressed with the ease of ethical buying. While the free produce movement blossomed for a short time, it did not become a viable alternative to slave-produced goods in most communities. Some historians have suggested that it failed because finding free labour cotton and sugar substitutes proved too challenging. Production levels for such goods were low compared to slave-grown commodities, and so purveyors had difficulty building a solid market despite rising disposable income in the lower and middle classes that resulted in what consumer scholars now see as a boom in spending. Buyers wanted more goods, these scholars conclude, but not pricier ones—and the market trumped morality.[4]

But profitability is only one measure of success, even in histories of the economy. The number of stores that specialized in goods produced by free labour and of free produce associations are others, as is the prominence of free labour ideology in both local and national advocacy movements. Free produce wares flourished in some abolitionist communities—particularly Philadelphia, New York, and Wilmington. Association minutes and correspondence, as well as advertising language, help illuminate how free produce vendors reached these markets while promoting a particular set of social ideals. For while American revolutionary tea party rhetoric encouraged colonists to think about their rights, free produce supporters asked consumers to consider the well-being of others, at the same time that it reinforced the value of a dollar. Free produce sought, in other

words, not to distance ethics from economic concerns, but to create both profits for purveyors and consumers with a conscience.

In 1826, Quaker Friends in Wilmington, Delaware, drew up the first charter for a formal free-produce organization, and that same year Baltimore Quaker Benjamin Lundy opened a store that sold only goods obtained by labour from free people. In 1827, the movement expanded with the formation of the Pennsylvania Free Produce Society in Philadelphia. Pennsylvania quickly dominated free produce agitation, but over time more than fifty stores opened in eight other states, including Ohio, Indiana, and New York. Meanwhile, parallel movements operated in Britain and were even attempted by abolitionist advocates in the Caribbean. Such efforts not only linked buying behaviour to notions of morality but also helped promote "free" commodity industries in the East Indies and Africa. "We are too dependent upon American slavery for the supply of this important article," those targeting U.S. southern cotton argued. "The remedy for this dependence is commercial encouragement" of "the free cotton growers of British India, the West Indies, Africa," or, much closer to home, the newly independent nation of Haiti, as well as "the free cotton growers of the United States themselves."[5]

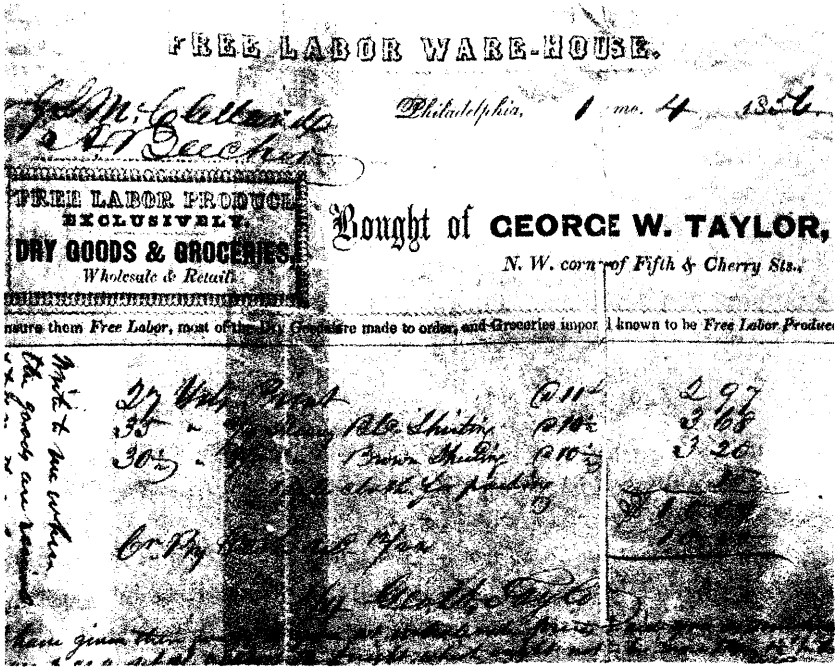
Although the free produce movement was not strictly a sectarian response to slavery, most association members were Quakers. The idea of a boycott of slave produce dated from at least the mid-eighteenth century when it was advocated by John Woolman, Joshua Evans, and others. Not all Quakers, however, cleaved to these ideals. Some, such as Anthony Benezet, tried to ensure that their marketplace matched their moral code, but others, including Thomas Willing and John Reynell, invested a significant proportion of their mercantile efforts in the slave-based economies of the Caribbean.[6]

What set the consumer activism of the early nineteenth century apart from these earlier individual efforts, however, was its shift from producers or importers, and their ability to personally decide a course of action, to the far broader base, and larger numbers, of consumers. It also emphasized the power of peer pressure over individual choice. The movement quickly became popular among many abolitionist leaders, including Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Gerrit Smith, and the Grimke sisters, who were all early supporters, consumers, and even investors in free labour enterprises, particularly during the peak of abolitionist unity in the late 1830s and early 1840s. Smith, for example, served as vice president of the American Free Produce Association for several years, and Angelina Grimke

ensured that her 1838 wedding to Theodore Weld featured only free-sugar desserts made by an African American confectioner. Others promoted the project through publications, including the poet John Greenleaf Whittier who edited the *Non-Slaveholder*, the most important free produce journal of the early nineteenth century, and, for a time, William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the *Liberator*. Indeed, in the movement's early years, Garrison provided extensive coverage of, and editorial support for, the free produce movement. Still others took a more material stance. The husband of feminist Quaker Lucretia Mott ran a free produce store in Philadelphia, and David Lee Child, the husband of the famous writer Lydia Marie Child, traveled to France in 1837 to study sugar beet production in the hopes of finding an alternative to Louisiana's and Cuba's cane fields. Elias Hicks and Charles Collins, two of New York's leading Quakers, used free produce profits to finance emigration efforts to Haiti. Emigration proponents hoped that business-minded free blacks resettled in Haiti might, along with newly manumitted slaves, create a free labour alternative that challenged slavery in both the U.S. and the Caribbean. Toward that end, Collins operated a free produce store on New York's Cherry Street between 1817 and 1843, selling over fifty thousand pounds of coffee provided by Haitian President Jean-Pierre Boyer to help finance emigrants' transportation costs.[7]

Many well-known black abolitionists, including Henry Highland Garnet, William Wells Brown, and Frances Harper, also supported free produce in their writings and on trans-Atlantic lecture tours, and some, including Lydia White and William Whipper, operated free produce establishments as well. Richard Allen, leader of the African American Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States, joined the Free Produce Society in the 1820s, urging other African Americans to do so as well. He also personally contributed to the manufacture of free labour fashion by recruiting free black seamstresses to design dresses and hats to be worn as material manifestations of abolitionist sentiment.[8]

In 1838, these efforts coalesced in the Requited Labor Convention held in Philadelphia, which Garrison, Mott, and other abolitionist leaders attended and which led to the establishment of a national American Free Produce Association. In their founding charter, the association declared that "as slaves are robbed of the fruits of their toil, all who partake of those fruits are participants in the robbery." If these words implied that consumers merely enabled a crime whose main perpetrators lay elsewhere, this was not the position of the free produce activists who understood consumers to be, as one activist put it, "the ultimatum of the whole sys-



George W. Taylor warehouse receipt, January 4, 1856, property of the author. This invoice from George W. Taylor's store promoted "FREE LABOR PRODUCE EXCLUSIVELY. Dry Goods and Groceries, Wholesale and Retail." Made out to J. M. Clelland and A. Beecher, it listed twenty-seven yards print (printed cloth), thirty-five yards heavy black sheeting, thirty yards brown sheeting, and one bale "cloth for packing" for a total of $10.00.

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> that the northern merchant who purchases the cotton, sugar and rice of the southern planter . . . the auctioneer who cries his human wares in the market, and sells those helpless victims of cupidity . . . yea, even the heartless, murderous slave-trader, are each and all of them, only so many AGENTS, employed by and for the CONSUMER.[9]

Moreover the growing number of free produce stores, such advocates contended, made this kind of theft all the more gratuitous.[10]

Recognizing the necessary pragmatism of their endeavour and actually building an industry, however, were often two different enterprises. Collin's New York store, which operated for twenty-six years, was a success by

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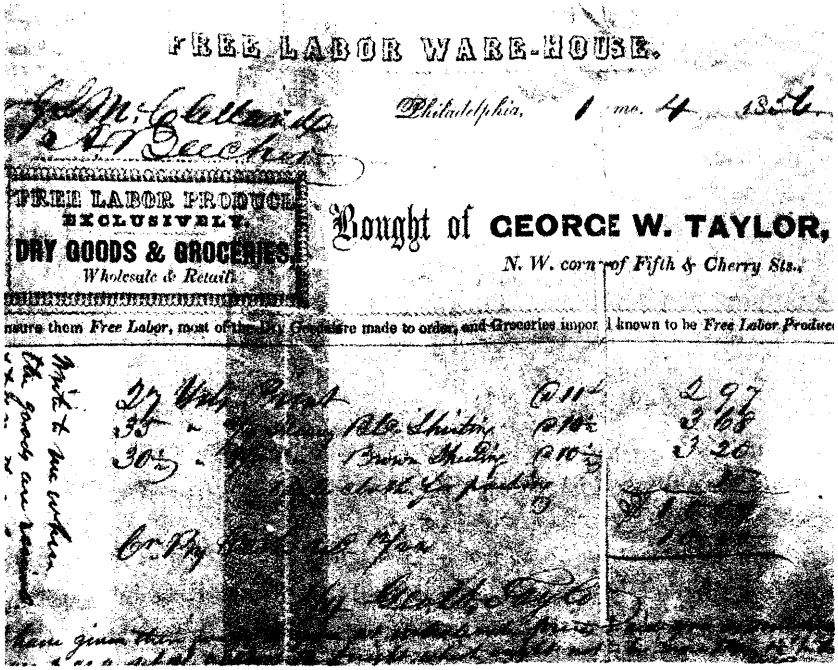

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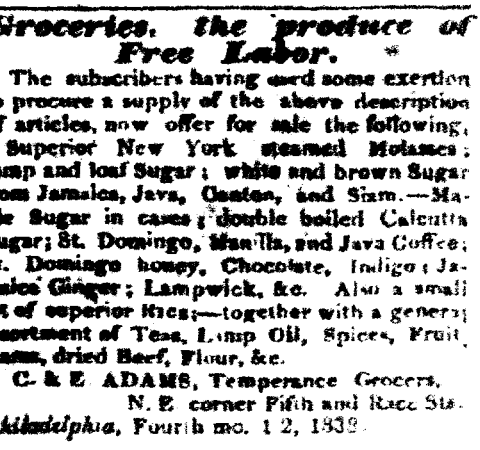
Recognizing the necessary pragmatism of their endeavour and actually building an industry, however, were often two different enterprises. Collin's New York store, which operated for twenty-six years, was a success by

most measures, but other free produce stores operated only briefly, and many were economically unstable. Perkins & Towne, for example, ran a free produce store at 141 Bowery Street in New York City from 1839 to 1841, but Hoag & Wood's store proved more tenuous. It opened in February 1848 but by October of that year had been taken over by Robert Lindley Murray, who, "having purchased the stock of Hoag & Wood, purposes carrying on the business, dealing exclusively in produce which is the result of Free Labor," at the same location, 377 Pearl Street, New York.[11] Murray himself, however, was foundering less than a year later.

Philadelphia's free produce vendors maintained viable businesses over longer periods of time. James Miller McKim, for instance, began advertising "goods manufactured by the American Free Produce Association," specifically ginghams, checks, flannels, and muslins for clothing and bed linens, as well as cotton ticking for mattresses, in July of 1848 from his store at 31 North Fifth Street; he continued to regularly run an almost identical notice through 1852. McKim's mercantile efforts formed only a portion of his abolitionist activities; he lectured extensively, worked with the Underground Railroad, co-founded the American Anti-Slavery Society, and in 1849 was the recipient when slave Henry "Box" Brown was mailed to freedom. He also frequently testified in court on behalf of freed slaves captured under the auspices of the Fugitive Slave Law, which was passed by Congress in 1850 and allowed slave-catchers to seize alleged slaves without due process of law and prohibited anyone from aiding escaped slaves or obstructing their recovery. After the Emancipation Proclamation, he organized efforts to welcome and assist the thousands of newly freed slaves who emigrated north, and in 1865 he co-ordinated the financial backing to establish the progressive magazine the *Nation*.[12]

George Washington Taylor had one of the most successful free produce business ventures of all. Taylor had been born in Radnor, Pennsylvania, and attended Quaker schools for most of his education. He was an agent of the Friends Bible Association and publisher of the periodical the *Non-Slaveholder* and a peace paper written by Elihu Burritt entitled the *Citizen of the World*. He opened his free produce store on March 4, 1847, at the northwest corner of Fifth and Cherry Streets in Philadelphia, a location which had formerly housed a free produce store operated by Joel Fisher, and he was still advertising from the same location a decade later. Taylor's advertisements emphasized both the provenance of his producers and the moral culpability of consumers. He specialized in "cotton goods



Groceries, the produce of Free Labor.

The subscribers having used some exertion to procure a supply of the above description of articles, now offer for sale the following, Superior New York steamed Molasses; lump and loaf Sugar; white and brown Sugar from Jamaica, Java, Canton, and Siam.—Maple Sugar in cakes; double boiled Calcutta Sugar; St. Domingo, Manilla, and Java Coffee; St. Domingo honey, Chocolate, Indigo; Jamaica Ginger; Lampwick, &c. Also a small lot of superior Rice;—together with a general assortment of Teas, Lamp Oil, Spices, Fruit, Mats, dried Beef, Flour, &c.

C. & E. ADAMS, Temperance Grocers,
N. E. corner Fifth and Race Sts.
Philadelphia, Fourth mo. 12, 1838.

C. & E. Adams advertisement, "Groceries, the produce of Free Labor," *Pennsylvania Freeman*, May 3, 1838, Early American Newspapers Series 1 and 2, 1660–1900.

manufactured by the Free Produce Association" and "provided for those who really wish to be non-slaveholders."[13]

Some free produce stores, to expand markets further still, not only serviced local needs but also operated mail order catalogues, thus expanding the potential reach of their activist impact beyond their neighbourhoods and even cities. Ezra Towne, another New York shopkeeper, assured both "dealers and families" that goods "free from the stain of slavery" were "carefully packed for the country." McKim advertised his store in both local Philadelphia newspapers as well as *Frederick Douglass' Papers* in Rochester, New York, where he noted that "Orders for Goods, or letters describing information may be addressed to J. Miller McKim, 31 North Fifth street; Daniel L. Miller, Tenth street; or to James Mott, No. 35 Church Alley."[14] Taylor likewise began his free produce store with cotton cloth and bedding, although by 1855 had expanded to include "an assortment of groceries," and two years later offered "prices, lists, and samples sent by mail."[15]

Storekeepers who opted to limit supply sources to those using free labour in commodity markets still dominated by production through enslaved workers necessarily faced price competition. Delegates of the Requited Labor Convention recognized the problem and even proposed sending a petition to Congress to repeal duties on "all goods which come in competition with slave labour produce, at least as far to place them on an equal footing."[16] Storekeepers, meanwhile, described their inventory in ways that coupled material goods with less tangible benefits to justify

any extra cost. In 1848, for example, Robert Lindley Murray "opened with prices which he believes will be found (with the exception of dry goods, some kinds of which must for the present be somewhat higher) to be uniformly the market rates." But, he continued, he relied on consumers to ensure his financial success, "trusting the increased business which this fact, as it becomes known, may secure, will enable him to maintain this desirable position, notwithstanding the disadvantages which a store of this kind is under, when compared with those which make no distinction between the products of Slave and of Free Labor."

Murray's onus on the buyer—cast as a moral and economic partner rather than simply a patron—was not unusual. Value, such advertisements implied, had several constituent factors. The inherent cost of an object was important but needed to be calculated along with the social and economic conditions surrounding its production, distribution, and consumption. And while Murray focused on coffees and teas rather than clothing and bedding like McKim and Taylor, he too offered "orders by mail carefully attended to."[17]

Most free produce stores stocked similar inventories, especially cotton cloth, sugar, and coffee. But a smaller subset of enterprising vendors offered less common commodities such as free labour molasses, rice, and chocolate. Some offered alternatives, such as Eli Adams' sale of "maple sugar . . . a fair sample of free labor sugar, having been manufactured in our own state by labor-paying farmers."[18] Others included the provenance of their wares to reassure buyers of the free labour origins. Charles Wise's coffee came from the East Indies and St. Domingo, or the newly freed nation of Haiti, and his sugar from Canton. Robert McClure's sugar and candy arrived from Calcutta and his coffee from Africa, while C. & E. Adams, who advertised themselves as "Temperance Grocers," sold goods from Siam, Calcutta, Manila, and Java. [19] Place, in other words, served as a kind of geographic branding, a short-hand to buyers about the provenance of their provisions that simultaneously educated them about the relative status of free versus enslaved labour around the globe.

Other goods, however, less often associated with free labour activism also appeared in the same newspaper pages. Mark Brook's notice for "ice cream made of free labor sugar" seems a natural extension of boycotts on slave-produced cane, but it is unclear whether C. & E. Adams' "oil, spices, fruit, hams, and dried beef" were part of their antislavery inventory or were non-free labour goods included to provide prospective customers with more reasons to visit their store.[20] James Willis, who operated

a shoe store at 241 Arch Street, also in Philadelphia, provided one of the only non-agricultural free labour commodity markets. His advertisement, which changed little over the eight years of his business, promoted a "FREE LABOR BOOT AND SHOE STORE—Women's and Children's Boots and Shoes, of every description, and best materials, and entirely free from the contamination of slave labor."[21]

Several historians have noted women's active role in the abolition movement, so it is unsurprising that they also appear as free produce purveyors. They made up almost half of the delegates at the 1838 Requited Labor Convention and formed an important if smaller fraction of the retail market. Lydia White, for example, operated a "requited labor and temperance grocery store" at 219 North Second Street in Philadelphia, where she sold sugar, coffee, coffee, cotton, spices, and teas.[22] By 1845, White had moved her operation to the northwest corner of 5th and Cherry Streets, where she operated the only "store in the city where free goods are sold exclusively"; two years later, however, this address had come under the ownership of George W. Taylor. Laetitia Bullock, just one block west, offered more specialized goods, including ice cream, water ices, jellies, cakes, and candies, "all the produce of Free Labor, and warranted to give every satisfaction."[23]

Interestingly, free produce and free labour initiatives emerged on both local and national agendas almost simultaneously. The American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery initially focused on ending the slave trade, but by 1827 it had appointed a committee to review the viability of "experiments [that] have been heretofore made, and are now making, on the American Continent and Islands, in relation to the cultivation of the products of Cotton, Rice, Sugar, Tobacco, &c. by free labor." The committee, chaired by the same Benjamin Lundy who operated Baltimore's first free produce store, outlined several promising possibilities, ranging from free produce sugar initiatives in parts of the British Caribbean, Haiti, and even Mexico, to experiments in growing free cotton in North Carolina and Alabama, as well as the manufacture of this cotton into coarse muslins by "a gentleman in Rhode Island." One report suggested that tobacco been "successfully cultivated in the State of Ohio, where it is known that slavery does not exist," as well as piloted by some free black migrants who moved from Kentucky to Canada.[24] While some of these schemes undoubtedly remained imagined rather than realized, they demonstrate the movement's desire to make antislavery efforts tangible rather than remaining within the realm of reified rhetoric.