



CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION PUBLIC LECTURE SERIES

Contradictions of Consumer Culture: Food and the Problem of Consumer Sovereignty

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ABSTRACT

No area of contemporary consumer capitalism has been more contested than food. For the last two decades, consumer champions have had a field-day world-wide attacking food evils. These have ranged from new adulterations, hi-tech fiddles and food safety infringements to price fixing, food poverty and old-fashioned fraud. Proponents of the food industry are perplexed and often hurt by accusations that they fail the consumer. How can this be when supermarkets offer 25000+ items for consumers to graze? When choice rules supreme? When food has dropped in price? Has not the public, they muse, got more healthy and longer-living? So why the complaints?

This lecture addresses some central contradictions of consuming culture, a battle for the mind as much as the heart and mouth. He argues that both the food industry and public policy are ironically equally obsessed with 'the consumer', while no such homogeneous person or social grouping exists. He proposes that consumer movements worldwide went into intellectual decline at their moment of apparent greatest success, the 1980s. This was in part because they failed to address new agenda such as the environment and public health, and in part because new organisations emerged to compete for public attention.

Centrally, the issue being contested is power, the terms and conditions on which humans interact with each other. In this respect, consumer politics are no substitute for real politics, in food as with other policy areas. Politicians have responded to the criticism not by addressing the nature of supply but by creating instruments such as regulators, agencies and advisory groups which protect them from political accountability and redress.