

Kai-Uwe Hellmann · Ansgar Klein ·
Bernward Baule *Editors*

Consumer Policy from Below

Paradoxes, Perspectives,
Problematizations

Second Edition

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Preface

This anthology is based on a conference of the same name, which took place on June 14, 2019 at the Institute for Sociology at the TU Berlin. It owes its existence to the suggestion of Bernward Baule, the then head of the department V B 4, Consumer Research, Consumer Education at the Federal Ministry of Justice and Consumer Protection (Bundesministerium der Justiz und für Verbraucherschutz (BMJV)).

The conference was financially supported by the BMJV. Thanks also go to Steffi Schinschke from the office of the Consumer Research Network at the BMJV and Sebastian Gülland, Silke Kirchhoff and Leonie Mader from the Institute for Sociology at the TU Berlin, who were very helpful in preparing and conducting the conference.

The metaphor ‘from below’ obviously reflects a ‘from above’. To what extent these attributions are accurate is an empirical question. However, a special dialectic and interaction between the state and civil society regarding consumer policy issues have now become unmistakable, although the lethargy of state consumer policy due to a long-practiced power asymmetry is still very pronounced.

It is to be hoped that the existentially important field of consumer policy will not remain an appendage of unrelated policy fields and will not only find temporary attention due to opportunism or even scandal-driven, but that it will finally receive the institutional and not least budget-appropriate recognition it deserves, which has been denied to it for decades.

Berlin
Beginning of July 2020

Kai-Uwe Hellmann

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Consumer Policy from Below: An Introduction

Kai-Uwe Hellmann and Ansgar Klein

Abstract

Consumer policy in Germany has long been a network of actions, organizations, and strategies that was particularly close to the state, i.e., oriented towards and around the state. Most of the time, orders were issued by the state or with the state's approval and support, funding models were set up, and laws were enacted, which could give the impression that there was essentially only a 'consumer policy from above' dictated by macro politics. However, in recent years, this asymmetry has shifted significantly in favor of civil society, keyword 'Political Consumption', and by now there are so many actions, initiatives, and organizations that one can probably speak of an increasingly stronger 'consumer policy from below'. This anthology traces these changes to some extent.

Keywords

Engagement policy · Consumer morality · Guiding principle · Maturity · Political consumption · Prosumism · Participation · Responsibility · Grassroots consumer policy

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1 Long Time from Above—Now also from Below

German consumer policy¹ has been characterized since its first, tentative beginnings in the 1950s by the fact that it was not only related to the state, predominantly at least, but was also largely operated by the state. Not that there were not also isolated initiatives in and from the civil society sector that were motivated and active in consumer policy (Selter 1973; Scherhorn 1975; Biervert et al. 1984; Baule 2012, p. 568 ff.; Jaquemoth and Hufnagel 2018, p. 163 ff.). However, in terms of their effectiveness, including their self-understanding, and even more so in terms of their institutionalization and organizational forms, one primarily dealt with a ‘consumer policy from above’ that was predominantly state-oriented and oriented towards the state (Bock and Specht 1958; Kuhlmann 1990; Lübke 1991; Janning 2003, 2011). Not much came from the middle of the citizens (von Braunschweig 1965; Rick 2018)—certainly also a legacy of the political culture of the decades before.

In contrast to this decades-long dominance of a ‘consumer policy from above’, a civil society counterpower has only formed over the last good thirty years, which advocates a ‘consumer policy from below’ and increasingly self-initiatively and stubbornly, creatively and obstinately fights for it, yes, to actively and effectively co-design the agenda of German consumer policy from below, to set its own topics and to noticeably accelerate the pace of the intended transformations (Baringhorst et al 2007; Baringhorst and Witterhold 2015).²

The reasons for this are manifold. One could refer to the change in values as described by Ronald Inglehart (1977) in ‘Silent Revolution’, or speak of an ‘uprising of the audience’ as Jürgen Gerhards (2001) has done. This spirit of departure began in the course of the 1960s. However, it took another twenty years, if one considers the founding of the Verbraucher Initiative e. V. 1985 as a

¹Where it should be questioned right away whether this ensemble of issues and initiatives actually already constitutes an independent policy field that puts consumers (of both sexes) at the center of its attention, or whether it is still rather attempts, approaches, efforts in this direction, without real systematics and determination, so that it would be better to speak of highly scandal-driven, poorly coordinated consumer protection measures, without real field or ‘policy’ quality. Cf. Müller (2001); Lamla and Klein (2005).

²Cf. issue 4 (2005) ‘Unterschätzte Verbrauchermacht’ and issue 2 (2015) ‘Das Private ist Politisch. Konsum und Lebensstile’, both published by the *Forschungsjournal Neue Soziale Bewegungen*.

kind of turning point (because for the first time the self-organization³ of consumers was really in the foreground), until this consumer policy counterpower had mobilized and organized itself to such an extent that it had also grown into a relevant size and strength of influence (Nessel 2016).

A situation has now arisen that fully justifies the assumption of a fully developed ‘consumer policy from below’. Its effectiveness may still prove to be limited. However, its volume, its diversity, its sense of mission, and its will to shape are undeniable. In this respect, what was discussed about almost 30 years ago as ‘Demokratie von unten’ (Roth 1994) respectively ‘Democracy from below’ (Koopmans 1995) now also applies to the field of consumer policy: the increased inclusion and participation of citizens in the initiation and implementation of consumer policy and specific consumer protection reforms.

2 With a Big P and a small p

In science, the internationally highly agile research field ‘Political Consumerism’ primarily deals with what is generally meant here by ‘consumer politics from below’. Although there were already initial approaches to this long before, academically a kind of ‘tipping point’ can probably be identified with the publication of the anthology ‘Politics, Products, and Markets. Exploring Political Consumerism Past and Present’ by Michele Micheletti, Andreas Føllesdal, and Dietlind Stolle in 2004. This was followed in 2013 by the systematically designed overall presentation ‘Political Consumerism. Global Responsibility in Action’ by Stolle and Micheletti (2013). Since then, this field of topics has experienced an impressive boom (Böström et al. 2019).

However, it remains peculiarly vague what the political aspect of political consumption actually is. Intentions and motives, forms of action and organization, and not least successes and effects are of course discussed (Micheletti et al. 2004; Boström et al. 2005; Baek 2010; Newman and Bartels 2011; Koos 2012).⁴ Nevertheless, the answer is not entirely simple as to when exactly forms of expression

³ Cf. Biervert et al. (1984); Nessel (2016).

⁴ In general, it seems advisable, in addition to motive research, which promises little reliability in terms of practical consequences, keyword ‘attitude-behavior-gap’, to focus even more on the analysis of forms of action and not just to observe ‘boycotts’ and ‘buycotts’, as is predominantly done, but the entire spectrum, as it has already been systematically recorded, see Barnes and Kaase (1979).

and action of political consumption are to be taken seriously politically. How should this be dealt with?

To briefly refer back to movement research at this point: In 1985, Joachim Raschke (1985, p. 109 ff.) proposed a ‘typology’ for discussion that distinguished between power-oriented and culture-oriented movements. While power-oriented movements strategically aim at the center of the political system, more precisely the state in the form of the government, in order to bring about, prevent or reverse a more fundamental social change for all, culture-oriented movements are more interested in fundamental changes in the respective way of life of their followers, so they show a strong self-reference—but sometimes also tend to want to prescribe their philosophy of life to the general population, just not politically.

If this distinction is transferred to political consumption, it could be assumed: As long as political consumption primarily acts power-oriented, i.e. clearly appeals to the state in order to initiate a more fundamental change in our production and consumption routines, it is consumer politics with a big P, and the question of the political would be comparatively easy to answer. Otherwise, one would be dealing with a form of political consumption that is much more culture-oriented, engages at most at the periphery of the political system, and thus rather practices politics consumption with a small p—whereby this political consumption with a small p experiences enormous demand, as is known from the 1968 slogan ‘The private is political’⁵. To what extent this implies more than mere life-style behavior would have to be examined in detail (Connolly and Prothero 2008; Holzer 2010; Baringhorst 2015; Wahlen and Laamanen 2015).

3 Responsibility and Participation

In any case, political consumption is currently receiving considerable attention and resonance. Greta Thunberg has become a representative icon. Often associated with this is the question of consumer responsibility. After all, almost everything that is produced worldwide is available on markets sooner or later and can be purchased by us consumers, in line with the famous formulation by Adam Smith from 1776: ‘Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production’. In the end, it depends on each individual how he or she behaves at the ‘Point of

⁵ See issue 2 ‘Das Private ist Politisch. Konsum und Lebensstile’ by the *Forschungsjournal Neue Soziale Bewegungen* 2015.

Purchase' regarding the issue of political consumption, and accordingly, each of us has a certain responsibility—but how much and with what consequence? What does 'Politics in the Supermarket' (Stolle et al. 2005) achieve politically? And wouldn't 'Politik statt Einkaufswagen' (Hartmann 2013) be much more effective?

The debate about the relevance of consumer responsibility ('Consumer Social Responsibility') has found great interest in Germany in the last ten years (Schrader 2007; Heidbrink et al. 2011; Schmidt 2016). However, it repeatedly appears that the 'attitude-behavior-gap' often seems insurmountable. In certain circles, the vehement advocacy and promotion of consumer responsibility may have become enormously popular, almost fashionable. But it remains questionable to what extent this can be demanded of everyone else, and even more, whether one actually lives up to it—or whether a special version of double standards shapes one's own consumer behavior. At least the impression often arises that water is preached here, but wine is very gladly drunk, be it in questions of nutrition, leisure activities, mobility, use of technology, tourism, basically everything included.

A related question focuses on the conditions of the possibility of consumer participation. Fundamental to the issue of participation is likely the idea of expanding membership and participation rights in modern society by Thomas H. Marshall (Marshall 1950; Hellmann 2012). It started with the expansion of civil liberties, later political participation rights such as universal suffrage were added, to find their provisional conclusion in the participation of all in the blessings of the welfare state.

By now, we have reached a stage of development where the impression sometimes arises that participation in society is largely guaranteed by comprehensive participation in consumption, almost a new human right (Riesman and Roseborough 1964; Hellmann 2010). Otherwise, exclusion threatens if a certain consumption standard is not reached (Bosch 2010; Chen et al. 2017). This is still about participation in society as such (Kraemer 2002).

To be distinguished from this is political inclusion through consumer protest, which again leads back to the distinction of political consumption with a big P and a small p (Stolle and Hooghe 2011). Because it is quite conceivable that a power-oriented execution of political consumption, which is explicitly related to the state, also leads to a real inclusion in the political system, just like with all other concerns that are brought forward with the intention of becoming the subject of collectively binding decisions that are then to become effective for all without exception.

The situation is different when it comes to the culture-oriented execution of political consumption. This variant does not aspire to an active role in political

events, but mainly remains outside the political system and deals with questions of one's own lifestyle, or as Raschke has put it, with a new "paradigm of lifestyle" (Raschke 1985, p. 421). However, this differentiation also remains admittedly vague, as the current state of research does not yet allow for a precise clarification (Lamla and Neckel 2006).

4 Consumer Morality—Both Bright and Dark

Closely linked to the debate on responsibility and participation is the discussion about the ethics of consumption (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Koslowski and Pridat 2006; Devinney et al. 2010). Sometimes, there is also talk of moral consumption (Hedtke 2005; Brandl 2007; Ullrich 2008; Barnett et al. 2010, p. 1 ff.).⁶ This perspective directly corresponds with the culture-oriented execution of political consumption when it comes to questions of the right, especially sustainable, way of life.

Of course, in the debate about morality, as Theodor Geiger had already stated early on, it is difficult for modern society to reach a comprehensive consensus. Instead, one should assume a fundamental 'moral schism' (Geiger 1964; Hellmann 2003). Thus, each class, each lifestyle, each subculture forms its own moral standards, which by no means find general approval.

This insight can easily be transferred to consumption, which considerably complicates the chances of success of political consumption. Because there we already find such a plurality and unstoppable pluralization of consumer behavior today that it is hard to imagine how this diversity could be brought back to a higher-level unity—a question that Émile Durkheim had already dealt with on a larger scale (Hellmann 2004).

Given the entire spectrum of consumer moralities as they are practiced globally today, political consumption, whether culture- or power-oriented, thus represents only one facet, which, considered in isolation, may believe it is propagating the only right thing; but this does not apply without objection to everyone else and sometimes even provokes massive reservations and defensive reflexes. In this respect, such a 'consumer politics from below' almost dialectically provokes counter-positions, as we know well from movement research (Zald and Useem 1987).

⁶See also the Spiegel eBook 'Moral Consumption—Why it is so difficult to improve the world as a customer' from 2015.

5 Maturity ('Mündigkeit') in the Defensive

As controversial as the debate about the correct consumer morality is, the question of the correct consumer model is also controversial in consumer policy. The main line of conflict is drawn at the distinction between mature (sovereign) or not mature (manipulable). If the model of the mature consumer is about fundamentally attributing to him the ability to freely decide for himself in matters of his own consumption, with all the consequences that may arise from the responsibility of the associated consequences, the criticism of this points to the difficulties, sometimes impossibility, of behaving sovereignly in markets at all, because the information asymmetry between producers and consumers structurally always works to the disadvantage of the latter.

Without being able to go into the changing history of a consumer model debate that has been going on for some time, it is currently recognizable that the model of the mature consumer, which is represented and decisively enforced by EU jurisprudence, has at least come on the defensive in Germany (Mickletz et al. 2010; Kenning and Wobker 2013; Oehler 2013; Schmidt-Kessel and Germelmann 2016). There are good reasons for this. To what extent the fundamental skepticism about the maturity of consumers, however, is compatible with the self-understanding and concerns of the supporters of political consumption, in other words, to what extent an engaged 'consumer policy from below' does not just testify to the maturity of consumers, would still need to be clarified separately.

In any case, consumer policy, both below and above, as well as consumer research, are at a kind of crossroads where a single model has come under strong criticism, other, older and newer ones, are being put up against it, but it is still completely open, based on which rationality, which political strategy a certain consumer model, whether monomaniac or highly differentiated, can provide that orientation in the future, which is so urgently needed for policy making, legislation and consumer research (Bala and Schuldzinski 2019).

6 Consumer Policy and Engagement Policy: Challenges Posed by Prosumption and Co-production

The connections between the roles as consumers and as engaged citizens are increasingly coming into focus. This is particularly true where it is becoming increasingly clear that responsible individual consumption patterns and practices alone do not contribute to the necessary change. The change on the supply

and production side, as the realization from numerous discussions about climate change and sustainability, is absolutely necessary in order to achieve political goals such as stopping climate change. Regional goods, decentralized cycles, or sustainable production (such as renewable energy) are therefore among the priority goals that motivate the newly emerging role of the ‘prosumer’ and suggest to civil society an active participation in the change of the market’s supply structures.

The relationship between civil society and the economy has known approaches of mutual penetration and influence since the nineteenth century,⁷ keywords would be the social housing for workers already discussed by early socialist Robert Owen, cooperative and other communal forms of organization in the production of important economic goods, debates about public goods and common good economy, or also the concept of the ‘activity society’, which clearly shows the close interweaving of gainful employment, informal work, and engagement (Klein and Röbbke 2018). Critical keywords to the tense relationship between gainful employment and engagement and to the gray zones of transitions would be a ‘monetization’ of engagement or its instrumental use as a ‘resource’ in times of scarce public funds (BBE 2008).

The co-production of public goods has been discussed since the 1980s in the social policy debate of a development from the welfare state to the welfare society (Welfare Mix) (Evers and Olk 1996). For civil society, this resulted in the insight into ‘hybrid’ organizational patterns of the so-called ‘third sector’, in which civil society goals and economic principles of action reconnect with each other. It quickly became clear that engagement-based co-productions can gain dense illustrative material, both for better and worse, especially with regard to the developments of initially engagement-based welfare care, which in the form of welfare associations now belong to the largest national and European employers (Klein 2019).

The foreseeable co-productions in the field of climate, especially of renewable energy production and sustainable economy, should therefore learn from the experiences of the welfare associations, also with a view to avoiding wrong paths in dealing with engagement as only cost-saving ‘resource’. Co-production and prosumption, the importance of public goods, and the increasingly important role of municipal companies represent central themes for the future of consumer policy.

⁷On the relationship between civil society and the economy, see Adloff et al. (2016).

7 Activists, Actors, Initiatives, Organizations, Associations

In conclusion, as this volume is about ‘consumer policy from below’, it should be emphasized once again that the main drivers for dealing with this topic are the sheer number of actors and the diversity of topics with which this ‘consumer policy from below’ is pursued, and have now increased to such an extent that they would deserve a systematic survey and evaluation on their own. This cannot be achieved with such a collection alone. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that, in comparison with time, looking back about twenty years, the current situation has fundamentally changed. Never before have there been so many initiatives, organizations, projects dealing with consumer policy issues, from very small to quite large, just think of the Federal Association of Consumer Centers and the affiliated consumer centers in the states. It is now a hardly manageable mix, a hustle and bustle of actions, measures, goals in this increasingly complex field of consumer policy, that the state of development of this field should now fully justify the term ‘consumer *policy*’.⁸

In this volume, only a few actors, activists, initiatives, and organizations will be able to speak and introduce themselves. Therefore, there is no claim to completeness or representativeness. Rather, the aim is to provide an impetus to deal more systematically with what has emerged and happened in the field of ‘consumer policy from below’ over the last twenty years.

8 The Individual Contributions

In a first block, which deals with the question ‘The mature consumer as an obsolete model?’, Christoph Strünck, who has made important contributions to the ongoing consumer role debate in the past, once again intervenes in this debate and critically refers to its course, which has severely affected the model of the mature consumer in recent years; on the other hand, Strünck ruminates about the sense and purpose of consumer models in general. This is followed by Thomas Cannaday with a contribution that deals with the model of the mature consumer from a philosophical perspective and breaks a lance for this model, provided one considers a practice-theoretical revision.

⁸See footnote 1.

The second block deals with the relationship between political consumption and political participation. First, Karsten Fischer, from a political science perspective, addresses the central question of what is political about political consumption. The different variants of participation that can be identified in the context of political consumption play a significant role in this. Jörn Lamla then focuses on those forms of participation that are used on internet rating portals and asks what relevance these experiences and their justification patterns have for the expectation of participation associated with (political) consumption.⁹

The third block deals with the responsibility and responsibilities of consumers. Kathrin Loer approaches this topic from the political science side, repeatedly engages constructively with the idea of a ‘consumer policy from below’ and considers how the question of responsibility could be conceived from this perspective. Subsequently, Wolfgang Ullrich turns to the connection between consumption and responsibility with reference to Hans Jonas’ ‘Principle of Responsibility’ and toys with the possibility of a duty ethics that could receive more attention in this context.

In the fourth block, the three contributions are interested in the cultural-moral dimension of (political) consumption. Marianne Heinze starts by examining the circumstances of origin and forms of expression of the alternative consumption discourse from the 1970s and asks about its significance for the present. Daniel Kofahl then turns to the figure of the moral entrepreneur and illustrates his appearance, among other things, in conflicts that can arise from a preference for different food cultures. Finally, Günther Rosenberger introduces the dark sides of consumption, i.e., consumption behavior that is considered morally dubious and questionable or should even be referred to as criminal consumption.

The fifth and final block brings together actors, activists, initiatives, organizations, and associations, most of which can be assigned to the field of ‘consumer politics from below’. In the first contribution, Nina Birkner-Tröger first deals with the two distinctions of self- or external organization of consumer organizations as well as the mono- or poly-thematic treatment of policy fields and then provides an overview of the consumer political landscape of Austria, with a special focus on grassroots movements. In the second contribution, Heiko Steffens deals with the history of the Working Group of Consumer Centers (AgV, Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Verbraucherverbände), which represented the principle of external organization of consumer interests and was transformed into the Consumer

⁹See also Kornberger (2017).

Center Federal Association (vzbv) in 2000, as well as related consumer organizations. Georg Abel then explains the position of the Verbraucher Initiative e. V., which was founded in 1985 as a representation of consumers through self-organization.¹⁰ Next, Daniel Affelt presents several initiatives of the Bund für Umwelt- und Naturschutz Deutschland (BUND) Berlin, in which consumers in Berlin are offered various opportunities to become active themselves in the context of political consumption, such as sewing cafes, repair cafes, etc. The same applies to a bouquet of initiatives initiated and organized by the Verbraucherzentrale Nordrhein-Westfalen and presented by Jonas Grauel. The sixth contribution comes from Stefan Schridde and discusses measures on how to counter planned obsolescence or how to avoid it as much as possible, for example within the framework of the association ‘Murks? Nein Danke!’. Finally, Reinhard Singer, Kristina Schimpf, and Kathrin Steinbach explain the social innovation of ‘Law Clinics’ using the example of the ‘Humboldt Consumer Law Clinic’ of the Law Faculty of Humboldt University in Berlin, where consumers can receive free advice from law students for very specific consumer problems such as unjustified rent increases.

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¹⁰ See also Verbraucher Initiative (1996).

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The Informed Consumer as an Obsolete Model?



The Mature ('Mündige') Consumer: A Misunderstood Ideal?

Christoph Strünck

Abstract

The guiding principle of the mature ('mündige') consumer attracts criticism. Consuming maturely remains a goal that is not in question. But other questions arise: What does maturity ('Mündigkeit') mean in the context of consumption, what conditions must be met for this, what function can and should a guiding principle fulfill at all? The article critically engages with the scientific discussion about consumer guiding principles. It is discussed how sharply the proposed alternative guiding principles are differentiated from the mature consumer, and what soft flanks they have. At the same time, it is discussed what function the consumer guiding principles can have, whether the concept of the guiding principle is useful, and what misunderstandings there may be in the debate about it. The guiding principle of the mature consumer—so the conclusion—is more of an ethical orientation than an explanatory model. The recently proposed alternatives, on the other hand, serve as a kind of behavioral typology.

Keywords

Maturity · Consumer model · Rationality · Behavioral economics · Mind-behavior-gap

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1 What does Maturity ('Mündigkeit') Mean Here?

Since the Enlightenment, maturity has been the lofty goal of every educational reform. It is one of the great promises and at the same time the prerequisite of liberal democracies, which rely on mature citizens. It is therefore not surprising that the ability to act maturely has been extended to just about every social role that people are ascribed in modern societies.

To be mature means to act responsibly. Maturity is close to the idea of rationality, but it is not identical to it. It is the will to act rationally. People can fundamentally be rational, but do not want to use their reason themselves, instead leaving the decisions to others. Then they renounce an important ability and thus act immaturely. The central philosophical commentary on this comes from Immanuel Kant (1784):

“Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another.”

When consumer policy and consumer research talk about ‘mature consumers’, there is a lot of conceptual baggage attached to it. Self-critically, one must admit that this baggage was perhaps too hastily discarded in the debate about consumer role models. Maturity, understanding, reason and rationality are related, but they are not the same. Also, the guiding principle of the mature consumer is not identical with the ideal-typical scientific model of ‘rational consumption’, which is increasingly being questioned by behavioral economic research.

In the political, science policy and partly intra-scientific discussion about consumer policy role models, actually little has been said about the idea of maturity. Instead, consumer sciences are grappling with the limits of rationality when it comes to consumption decisions. The idea of ‘bounded rationality’ is somewhat dated (Simon 1959). But the experiments of behavioral economics have given this concept, originally related to organizations, human proportions. And they have redirected the focus back to routines, habits and norms, which are not opposed to rationality, but embed it socially (Reisch and Oehler 2009).

To use one’s understanding without guidance from another, i.e. to act maturely: What does this mean in terms of consumption? With our consumption decisions, we pursue certain purposes. These purposes are individually different, and they are also shaped by milieus, norms and social communication. Purposes define the space of the act of consumption, which can last a long time and during

which the purposes can also change: First I buy a bicycle for excursions, then I use it for commuting and actually it is also a status symbol.

Purposes can also be emotionally charged, they are not 'rational' or utility-oriented in the strict sense. The economic theory of democracy by Anthony Downs (1965) captures this logic of purpose-means rationality, as Max Weber had already developed: Voters can prefer parties that advocate altruistic goals. This is not irrational. But if they then do not vote for these parties because they have not dealt with the program, then they do not act rationally.

Reason must guide the choice of means to achieve the respective purposes: money, time, sources of information. There are many restrictions here, both individual and structural. If I don't think about which means I can use how, then I act immaturely. But if I come to the conclusion that my means are limited and therefore I need substitute solutions like test results or experience reports, then this is entirely in line with mature consumer behavior. Trusting test reports is also not the 'guidance of another'. Because the actual decision to trust, I have to make myself.

What ultimately motivates me to make such decisions is empirically anything but clear. Possibly, the mentioned or apparent motives are only retrospective rationalizations, while the actual impulse remains undiscovered. The needs and motives for consumption are still a blind spot in research, a kind of black box (Bauer and Gegenhuber 2015).

Even if it should be the case that we construct motives only when we justify ourselves, maturity as the essence of an important social role is not superfluous. Consuming maturely means thinking about my decision-making options and their limits. However, how much responsibility I can take for the decision depends on the framework conditions and my life situation.

In fact, mature consumers must attribute self-responsibility or attribute it to themselves. However, I can only take responsibility for things that I can influence. Or in the words of Hans Jonas (1984, p. 172): "The condition of responsibility is causal power".

Limits of self-responsibility were the impetus for the recent discussion about consumer role models. However, they are not automatically antipodes of the mature consumer. It could also be argued that the guiding triad of 'trusting, vulnerable and responsible consumers' is not an antithesis, but rather variants of the mature consumer. This is especially true for responsible consumers, whose active role sharpens the idea of the mature consumer. Perhaps, however, the three new guiding images are not guiding images in the true sense, with their own ethical foundation. But more on that later.

2 The Trusting, the Vulnerable, the Responsible Consumer: Alternatives or Differentiation?

Does it make sense to oppose the normatively established guiding image of the mature consumer with new guiding images in a critical intention? The semantics of guiding images themselves require (self-)criticism. The new consumer guiding images also suggest that there are different ideal types of consumers or consumer groups. However, from a sociological point of view, consumers are not a social group, but a role that is perceived differently. Guiding images therefore rather describe ideal types of consumer behavior or consumer situations.

In the statements of the former scientific advisory board at the Federal Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection (BMELV), in which the author was also involved, this sometimes sounds different. Here it is said that most people behave like ‘trusting consumers’: “They do not want and cannot take too much time for a consumption decision” (Micklitz et al. 2010). This group would be dependent on a minimum level of protection, among other things. This statement is only partially empirically verifiable. It is also not far-fetched that quite a few people also behave like ‘ignorant consumers’ (Klug 2015). The ‘mind-behavior-gap’ widely proven in research suggests this. Attitudes do not automatically lead to corresponding behavior.

At other points in the text, the ‘group of vulnerable consumers’ appears, who should be able to rely on a special level of protection. The latter is also officially represented by politics, for example when the EU demands from the member states to define the group of consumers worthy of protection in the energy market in order to prevent power cuts (Strünck 2017b).

Such understandable political necessities, however, make only limited sense scientifically, as consumers are not a social group, but describe a social role. A cognitively impaired older person may be vulnerable when making health-relevant decisions. However, he does not necessarily have to be threatened by power cuts. If he also seeks help from independents, he rather acts as a trusting consumer.

Consumers can act responsibly in the fields where their political interest in change is greatest. However, those who buy fair trade clothing or organic food can also consume a lot of energy through digital consumption. And even ‘average’ consumers can be particularly active, informed, and responsible in certain areas of consumption.

The three new types of consumer (behavior) models therefore overlap. At the same time, they have different points of contact with the model of the enlightened consumer.

The 'trusting consumers' essentially rely on meta-rationality: They trust third parties, which they have to identify themselves and for which they have criteria for trustworthiness. Thus, the trusting consumers also use their intellect by acting in a way that saves efficiency, a classic form of means-rationality.

The vulnerable consumers (or vulnerable consumer behavior) are most likely to conflict with the model of the enlightened consumer. However, it is not necessarily a lack of 'will or courage' to use one's own intellect. Either their cognitive abilities are limited, or the conditions limit their options for action. The latter can be demonstrated again using the example of energy markets: Those in debt cannot easily switch to a cheaper electricity tariff, but are stuck in the expensive basic tariff (Strünck 2017b). Here, alternative solutions are needed to overcome the limits of enlightenment.

Do I also have to oversee the consequences of my consumption to be enlightened? This expectation is associated with the model of the 'responsible consumer'. Here, enlightenment means implementing one's own convictions through consumption in the sense of political consumerism: Negative external effects of consumption should be avoided, socially fair, ecological or other goals should be consciously promoted with consumption (Baringhorst 2007; Koos 2011). However, particularly active consumers in particular depend on receiving sufficient information about supply chains, product characteristics, and the consequences of consumption decisions. If this is difficult, they can only take limited responsibility for themselves.

Even this sketchy analysis suggests that the three models are not a replacement for the model of the enlightened consumer, but rather a differentiating supplement. Accordingly, the relevant statement concludes: "If one sticks to the model of the 'enlightened' consumer, consumer policy strategies must be more strongly oriented towards different behavior patterns". And the three new models are supposed to provide information about these behavior patterns. Are they then models in the true sense? In any case, they are based on assumptions that they share with the model of the enlightened consumer. And these assumptions are subject to criticism.

3 Are Consumer Models Too Individualistic?

One criticism that hits the model of the enlightened consumer as hard as its differentiations is that of individualistic narrowing. Consumption can fundamentally be seen as an act of community formation, embedded in larger societal consumption cultures and smaller communal consumption styles and habits. Even the needs themselves are not purely individual, but always socially constructed, not