

Globalisation and the Art of Boycotting

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Do consumers have any kind of real countervailing power in the age of neoliberal globalisation? A new book analyses the political role of boycotting and of exercising economic power “from below”.

Reviewed: Ingrid Nyström, Patricia Vendramin, *Le boycott*, Paris, Presses de SciencesPo, 2015, 135 p., 13€.

To buy or not to buy? That is, in essence, the practical question posed by the act of boycotting or its reverse, “buycotting”¹. Published in April 2015, this book (135 p.) by Ingrid Nyström and Patricia Vendramin devoted to this mode of protest is an addition to the “[Contester](#)” collection that was launched in 2008 by the Presses de SciencesPo, and aims to provide an accessible and synthetic account of the current state of research into the sociology of collective action, activism, and social movements. With this new offering, Ingrid Nyström, an expert in the analysis of economic and social policies, and Patricia Vendramin, Director of Research at the [Fondation travail-université](#) (Belgium) and lecturer at the [Université catholique de Louvain](#), have successfully tackled the editorial challenge of providing the reader, in a short format and clear style, with a tool for the historical and sociological analysis of boycotting actions, and with a methodology for interpreting their success in contemporary consumer societies. By combining contributions from the sociology of political participation and studies of “engaged consumption”, the authors reflect on what we might call economic power “from below”, thus reversing the usual approach of analysing this power “from above”².

From the *Boston Tea Party* to the BDS campaign

The word “boycott” appeared in the English language for the first time at the end of the 19th century, following a campaign that was carried out in 1880 in Mayo country (West Ireland) against the land agent Charles Cunningham Boycott. He was “boycotted” by the local population because he had decided to increase the rent on the land and thus caused the eviction of numerous peasant families (p. 16-18). The term then spread to numerous languages: *boicot* in Spanish, *boicotear* in Portuguese, *boikottirovat* in Russian, *boycottage* and then *boycott* in French. A boycott is, according to the definition suggested by the authors, “a systematic concentration of individual and deliberate actions leading to the refusal to entertain a relationship (be it commercial, political, cultural, sporting, diplomatic or academic) with a third party (community, company, state, etc.) with the aim of putting pressure on said third party” (p. 10). The first chapter of the book thus retraces the origins of and challenges in defining the notion of boycotting, which appears, from a historical perspective, as “the economic weapon” of groups with limited resources. This practice can be viewed within a continuum of actions that aim to weaken an adversary by isolating it socially and economically: ostracism, blacklisting, broadsiding, excommunication, embargoes or blockades (p. 13-16).

¹ An activist practice involving promoting the products or services of a company to reward behaviour that has been deemed exemplary.

² ACTES DE LA RECHERCHE EN SCIENCES SOCIALES, “Le pouvoir économique”, 190/5, 2011.

The practice of boycotting is more firmly anchored in Anglo-Saxon culture than elsewhere. Several “boycott” campaigns were carried out in Great Britain from the end of the 17th century, without yet being called as such. This was the case of the boycott carried out by the British colonies in America, which started with the colonists’ refusal to unload shipments of tea that had been sent over from England (*Boston Tea Party*, 1773) and ultimately led to the independence of the United States (1776). Another case was the boycott of sugar from the West Indies carried out by the English anti-slavery movement in 1790, and which led to the end of the slave trade in 1807 and the end of slavery itself in 1833. In the early 20th century, one of the most famous boycott operations in history was carried out in a British colony, India, with civil disobedience actions (*satyagraha*) launched in favour of his country’s independence by Gandhi, who called upon Indians to stop working for the English, to stop buying their products and using their services (1919-1922). To this day, boycotting is as routine a mode of action in the United Kingdom and the United States as striking or demonstrating can be in France (p. 27-30).

Nevertheless, the history of the 20th century and of the early 21st century has been marked by boycott campaigns outside of the Anglo-Saxon world. One might recall the boycott of Jewish shops by the Nazis on 1 April 1933 in Germany – one of the rare occasions on which this mode of action has been used for a discriminatory purpose. One of the most emblematic international boycott campaigns was that carried out against the regime of Apartheid in South Africa from 1958, at the request of the African National Congress, which covered sporting, cultural and artistic activities and used diplomatic pressure, and which ultimately led to the liberation of Nelson Mandela and to the end of the regime.

Currently, a boycott campaign called [“Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions” \(BDS\)](#) is underway: launched in 2005 at the request of Palestinian intellectuals and academics, and supported by 172 Palestinian civil society organisations, it calls for an economic, academic, cultural and political boycott of the state of Israel to protest against the colonisation and occupation of Palestinian territories, the construction of the Wall of separation and annexation, and campaign in favour of the equality of Israeli Arab and Jewish citizens, and the acknowledgement of the Palestinian refugees’ right of return. The penalisation of these actions in Israel and in France (through the so-called Alliot-Marie circular) shows that this mode of action is threatening to the intended targets or their allies.

Who are boycotters and what do they do?

Ingrid Nyström and Patricia Vendramin’s book also offers a sociological analysis of this mode of action, which they believe is perfectly in tune with “contemporary forms of activist engagement, in a network, and bringing together individuals who are concerned with choosing their affiliations and their causes, with personally expressing their view of things” (p. 10). The book thus offers several stimulating ways of interpreting the dynamics of engaging in boycotting activities. The second chapter undertakes, as a start, to define the profile of boycotters today, based in particular on data collected in the *European Social Survey* (2002-2003 and 2012 waves). These boycotters are described as “young, educated, wealthy and usually left-wing” (p. 31-37). Since the data used only concerns European participants, however, this limits the possibility of generalising this typical profile to other regions of the world. But a more detailed analysis shows that, within this population, women are proportionally more likely than men to engage in “boycotting” actions (p. 37-39) and that there are major differences between countries: the practice of boycotting is more common in Nordic countries and Switzerland than in the countries of Southern and Eastern Europe (p. 40-

45). These people's economic and political anchoring also constitutes an important factor in explaining their engagement: thus, national wealth, the concentration of commerce and the availability of certified products make the practices of boycotting and buycotting easier, as do various forms of "institutional encouragement" on behalf of the state (p. 49).

The authors then resituate the practice of boycotting within the contemporary repertory of civic and militant actions, and highlight some of the tensions that characterise this singular form of collective action (chapter 3). The first tension is that of the articulation between individual action and collective action – since we can describe boycotting as an "individualised collective action", to use Michele Micheletti's expression (p. 51). The second tension is connected to the positioning of boycotting between different types of collective action (so-called "conventional" or "non-conventional" practices of political participation) and between different ethical "lifestyles", to which "ethical", "political" or "critical" consumerism can lay claim. These forms of engagement may indeed constitute a step in a more long-term process of politicisation (p. 65-67).

Ingrid Nyström and Patricia Vendramin continue their analysis by reflecting on the "criteria of effectiveness" of boycotting (chapter 4). The authors underline the difficulties that both researchers and activists have in measuring the success or failure of a boycotting action. They compare three famous campaigns in order to establish some general criteria: the boycott of Danone in 2001-2003, which followed a wave of market-related redundancies; the boycott of the Montgomery bus company (United States) following the arrest and sentencing in 1955 of Rosa Parks, who had refused to give up her seat to a white man despite the segregationist laws that were then applicable; the boycott in 1995 of Shell by Greenpeace, which demanded the dismantling of an oil platform in the North Sea in order to preserve the marine environment. A "guidebook" presented at the end of the chapter is inspired in particular by the *Boycott Organizer's Guide*, which has been published since 1984 by the consumerist organisation Green America, and shows how important it is to correctly calibrate your message, to take into account the current or potential audiences of the operation, the media coverage of the boycott, and its organisation.

Boycotting as the weapon of the "consumariat"?

The final chapter offers us a general reflection on the political power of consumerist struggles in the contemporary world. Are boycotting actions able to constitute, as is suggested by a somewhat optimistic interpretation of the example of the attack of Paypal by Anonymous at the end of 2010, a "countervailing power of global civil society"? Could boycotting be the weapon of the "consumariat" (p. 94) and have taken over from the traditional struggles of the industrial proletariat? Should we believe that a shopping trolley in a supermarket can weigh as much, politically, as a booth in a polling station? How do corporations react to these operations, which are sometimes carried out on an international level, and which can durably affect the image consumers have of them? How do states view boycott actions from a legal perspective? Should we view boycotting as fertile ground for alliances between workers, citizens and consumers?

This frequently thought-provoking book opens up a series of questions which may become the objects of future studies. Does the interpretation it offers not somewhat mechanically reuse the framework for analysis of "new social movements"? According to this interpretation, these movements, unlike the "old" ones, are supposedly geared towards the satisfaction of "post-materialist", and not "materialist" needs, a more "horizontal" organisation in networks rather than a hierarchical one within organisations, a more

“distanced” and individualised engagement with the cause rather than a “total” and collective one. The supposed “novelty” of these forms of mobilisation has been extensively discussed in recent studies³. Likewise, the thesis of there being a strong “fluidity” of engagement in a boycott (individuals engage and disengage depending on circumstances) deserves to be called into question more in the light of longitudinal studies of activist careers and ethnographic (and not just statistic) observations of boycotting campaigns⁴. Can we be so certain that taking part in boycotting actions, which can last for years or even decades, fits within the model of “post-it” engagement that Jacques Ion is so fond of⁵? We can also ask ourselves to what extent the social properties of the boycotters are reducible to the typical profile drawn up in chapter 2 in the absence, on the one hand, of statistical data for geographical areas other than Europe, and on the other, of a more refined analysis of the internal (political and social) hierarchies that structure activist organisations. Finally, we can also wonder to what extent the way in which boycotting has become routine in contemporary Western societies might correspond to a kind of “trick of [economic] reasoning” in a context within which corporations that symbolically rehabilitate economic and financial activities are flourishing⁶.

This handful of starting points for debate and reflection do not take anything away from the general quality of this synthetic work, which will be useful both to students and researchers interested in studying social movements, and to citizens and activists keen to gain more information about this tool for collective struggle against the power of the capitalist mode of production and consumption.

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³ See also MATHIEU Lilian, “Les illusions du ‘nouveau’”, in *La démocratie protestataire*, Paris, Presses de SciencesPo, 2011, p. 45-77.

⁴ FILLIEULE Olivier, PUDAL Bernard, “Sociologie du militantisme. Problématisation et déplacement des méthodes d’enquête”, in *Penser les mouvements sociaux*, Paris, La Découverte, 2010, p. 163-184.

⁵ ION Jacques, *La fin des militants ?*, Paris, Éditions de l’atelier, 1997.

⁶ LORDON Frédéric, *Et la vertu sauvera le monde... Après la débâcle financière, le salut par ‘l’éthique’ ?*, Paris, Le Seuil, Raisons d’Agir, 2008.