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Democratic Consumption

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Abstract

This think piece explores the idea of democratic consumption. After explaining its etymological roots, 12 principles of democracy are described. A narrative of the review of literature (organized by century 19th, 20th and 21st) is followed with an analysis of common threads and emergent patterns. Five ideas were associated with democratic consumption with nominal agreement on how and in what direction: common good, economic freedom and capitalism, welfare state, ethical consumption, and diverse consumer interest. Although the focus of democratic consumption has changed over time, it is consistently linked with several principles (e.g., economic freedom, equality, freedom and rights, and the rule of law) and it eschews others (e.g., an independent judiciary). Consumer, philosophy, political, social welfare, economic, and peace theorists are encouraged to empirically explore what constitutes democratic consumption defined tentatively as behaviour having to do with consumption reflective of and influenced by democratic principles for a myriad of reasons.

Keywords: democratic consumption, democratic principles, consumer behaviour, common good, economic freedom**.**

Introduction

This think piece explores the idea of *democratic consumption*. Intending to "reopen what has been a long conversation about the nature of democracy in an age of consumer culture," Kroen (2004) referred to "the compatibility of consumption and democracy (p. 711). Of interest herein is how consumption is related to, informed by or reflective of democratic principles.

In a think piece, the author shares their conceptually advanced but still evolving thoughts on a topic to stimulate provocative thinking and scholarly discourse. Arguments are developed and tested in anticipation of other scholars judging them meritorious (McGregor, 2018; McLean, 2011). Think pieces "reflect an amalgamation of literature and the author's intellectual insights" (McGregor, 2018, p. 475). In that spirit, after explaining the etymological roots of democratic consumption, key principles of democracy are described as a preamble to reviewing literature pursuant to democratic consumption. The paper concludes with an analysis of common ideas that were threaded through and patterns emergent in this literature.

Etymological Roots

The suffix *-cracy* is a word-forming element used to create nouns. Democracy, one example, is Greek *demos,* 'the people' and *kratia,* 'power or rule' (Harper, 2021). A democracy is thus a form of rule or government where people have a say or voice in the exercise of political power, a voice they manifest by electing others to represent their interests (i.e., elected representatives constitute a representative democracy) (MacQuoid-Mason, 1994). Western democracy (also called liberal democracy) is a political system prevalent in the United States (presidential system), Canada (parliamentary system) and the United Kingdom (constitutional monarchy). It operates on the principles of liberalism including liberty, consent of the governed, and equality before the law. It manifests in free trade, capitalism, individualism, the rule of law, and the protection of rights and freedoms (Harpin, 1999).

The suffix *er* is Old English *ere*, 'man [sic] who has to do with' (Harper, 2021). So, a consum*er* is a person who has to do with consuming. Consume can have many meanings: (a) use up completely, (b) spend wastefully or squander, (c) use in great quantity, (d) avidly enjoy (devour), (e) fully engage (be engrossed) and (f) utilize as a customer (i.e., consume goods and services) ("Consume," n.d.). Consumer behaviour pertains to the "processes [people] use to select, secure, use, and dispose of products, services, experiences, or ideas to satisfy needs [and wants] and the impacts that these processes have on the consumer and

society" (Hawkins, Motherbaugh, & Best, 2007, p. 6). The word consumption is formed by adding the word-forming element *-tion* to the noun consume (Harper, 2021). *Democratic consumption* is thus behaviour having to do with consumption reflective of and influenced by democratic principles for a myriad of reasons.

Principles of Democracy

Iacocca (1984) posited that people who "buy a house and a car and a refrigerator [are] the cement in our whole democracy" (p. 319). But consumers have also been called the irrational masses because they are under the influence of persuasive and pervasive advertising and marketing (Aptheker, 1955). Sassatelli (207) characterized advertising and marketing as an "all-powerful 'brainwasher' [that] shapes the image of consumption and of consumers" (p. 126).

No longer trusted to make rational choices under this influence, it has been argued that consumers serve as evidence that mass consumerism is undermining the guiding principles of democracy (Aptheker, 1955). Lohmann (1988) suggested that people's brains have political parts and consumer parts. He asserted that it is time to use the political parts to think new thoughts that focus on consumption and democracy. This new thinking requires an awareness of the principles of democracy (Lohmann, 1988). Principles guide personal behaviour. Democratic principles can thus guide consumer behaviour, which inturn impacts democratic society. In an oft-cited document, MacQuoid-Mason (1994) spelled out 12 principles of democracy (see Table 1).

Table 1
Principles of Democracy (gleaned from MacQuoid-Mason, 1994)

- citizen participation in government
- free and fair elections
- accept election results – win or lose
- multiparty systems and perspectives
- transparency and accountability
- independent judiciary (separation)
- control of government's abuse of power
- rule of law
- protected rights and freedoms (Bill of Rights, charters, constitutions)
- political tolerance of diversity
- equality and human rights
- economic freedom

To begin, in descending order per Table 1, because democracy is about

elected representation, three key principles are citizen participation in government, free and fair elections (and the right to run for office), and accepting election results – win or lose – with a smooth transition of power. Next, democracies depend on multiparty systems that allow for formal opposition to the majority party. Different viewpoints exist on various issues, and voters have a choice of whom to vote for to best represent their interests. And, those elected are expected to be accountable to the public and responsible for their own actions. This means that elected officials must arrange for public meetings and consultations with constituents to ensure transparency so people can 'see through' their actions – both intent and consequences (MacQuoid-Mason, 1994).

To continue, a democracy has an independent judiciary that is separate from other parts of government. The judicial system (i.e., law courts, judges, and those who interpret the law and administer justice) can act without undue influence from or control by elected or other parties. Hand in hand with judiciary separation are the principles of zero tolerance for corruption, and the solid control of any abuse of power (e.g., misappropriated public funds or illegal political influence). An additional principle is the rule of law, which holds both that no one is above the law (i.e., everyone has to obey it) and everyone is entitled to equal protection of the law, which is enforced equally, fairly, and consistently in a democracy (MacQuoid-Mason, 1994).

In principle, citizens can also expect their rights and freedoms to be recognized and protected usually in charters, bills of rights, and constitutions. These instruments protect citizens from harmful actions of their elected government (but not from corporations' actions). Also, in a democracy, society is expected to be politically tolerant of diversity (e.g., culture, religion, ethnicity, age, sex, gender, sexual orientation, locale). In principle, all voices are valued, and people must be allowed freedom of assembly, movement, and speech (i.e., expression of thoughts and opinions) (MacQuoid-Mason, 1994).

In close association is the principle of equality and human rights. For clarification, democracy values equality and strives for everyone to have equal opportunities (i.e., resources to meet challenges) (MacQuoid-Mason, 1994). Respectfully, equality concerns giving everyone the exact same resources, while equity involves distributing resources based on people's needs so they can meet their challenges (Bronfenbrenner, 1973). To illustrate, three people of varying heights are behind a fence trying to see a ball game. From an equality stance, they would each get the same box to stand on. From an equity stance, the heights of the boxes would vary, so everyone can see over the fence. Premised on both concepts, democracy minimizes prejudice (erroneously prejudging someone) and discrimination (acting on the prejudgement). From a structural

(systemic) violence perspective, the fence would be removed entirely thereby eliminating the systemic barrier and source of inequity (Business Disability International, 2016).

Human rights value human life and dignity (i.e., the right to be valued and deemed worthy of respect). These rights include but are not limited to (a) the freedom to move within, beyond and back to one's own country; (b) freedom of assembly (people gathered together) and self-expression while assembled; and (c) freedom of thought and conscience as long as exercising these freedoms respects the law (MacQuoid-Mason, 1994). In particular, freedom of thought and conscience means people are aware that they *are* holding particular beliefs and are free to actually have, hold and act on them without persecution or prosecution. Indeed, democracy *depends* on people being able to harbor whatever opinions and beliefs their conscience dictates. They can act on these thoughts *if* they do not injure themselves or others (McKay-Panos, 2012). People draw on their conscience (i.e., moral sense of right and wrong) when they assemble and express their opinions (MacQuoid-Mason, 1994).

A final democratic principle is economic freedom, wherein the elected government encourages private ownership of property and businesses, and citizens have a choice of work with the option to join labour unions. In most democracies, free markets prevail with nominal government control over the economy – just enough to ensure uninterrupted, competitive trade (MacQuoid-Mason, 1994). Consumption is implicit in economic freedom, because free market capitalism depends on consumerism (the ideology) and consumption (the behaviour) with private ownership extending to people being able to own and consume what they purchase.

Economic freedom allegedly expands the range of choices for consumers (Vasquez, 2005). "Economic freedom, the right to use the fruits of our labor every day without political influence, is essential for democracy to thrive" (Dunkelberg, 2018, para. 1). That said, "capitalism [is] based on the freedom to: [sic] own property, earn a living, operate a business, invest earnings, trade internationally, and participate in a market economy" (Burkhart, 2000, p. 237). According to Jeremy Rifkin (American economic and social theorist), we "cannot have true participatory democracy in a market economy. [There is] absolutely no way of invigorating principles of democracy... so long as [companies and consumers] have to survive in a market economy" (as cited in Gabriel & Lang, 1995, p. 150). If participating in a capitalistic free market economy as a consumer impinges on democratic principles, then consumption can be characterized as undemocratic.

In summary, democracy is predicated on a set of widely accepted principles concerning a form of government where all citizens technically have

a say in a nation's life. These principles guide citizens' thought processes, behaviour, and attendant reflections on the same. Democracies provide opportunities to become personally involved in the life of a nation (especially the government). If the principles are adhered to, they ensure that power is evenly distributed, people can contribute their opinions without being overly judged (especially via voting), and they get to live in a country whose economy is strong and has steady growth. Elected representatives can be voted in or out at regular intervals helping citizens ensure their interests are being represented. Democratic arrangements tend to lead to stronger levels of patriotism, because, in principle, people have a say in molding a society that meets their expectations. Adherence to democratic principles also creates conditions where extremes are less frequent (people tend to come to the center), war is less likely to manifest, and economic stability is more assured (Miller, 2019). This paper concerns how these principles are linked with consumption.

Method for Collating Ideas about Democratic Consumption

Using Boolean searches via Google and Google Scholar in Winter 2021, the author judiciously selected and collated a diverse collection of ideas about democratic consumption and consumerism with the process unfolding until saturation (Kline & Farrell, 2005). The conceptually rich selection of ideas shared herein represents conceptualizations of democratic consumption prevalent from the 1800s to the 2020s. The presentation of this corpus reflects a cohesive and cogent argument that threads divergent ideas and aligned trajectories together per the tenets of preparing a think piece (Cohen, 2014; Lindsay, 2012; McGregor, 2018).

Results

Fourteen documents (i.e., refereed papers, books, book chapters, keynote addresses) were found pertaining to democratic consumption and consumerism (published between 1982 and 2020). Their presentation is organized chronologically by century (19th, 20th and 21st) unless detours are justified. Supportive or clarifying literature is interwoven into the results when warranted.

Nineteenth Century Democratic Consumption (1800s)

Speaking of consumption in nineteenth-century France (1800s), Williams (1982) affirmed that, during this era, democratic consumption was considered a manner of consuming that "encouraged a simplicity of lifestyle and

the dignity of the common man [sic]" (McCracken, 1988, p. 23). She suggested that "merchandise is seen, or rather heard, as making a statement [thereby enabling people to] communicate through things" (Williams, 1982, p. 203). Democratic consumption was viewed as a means of using consumption to instruct others about how to reform how *they* consume.

Building on this potential, the intent of democratic consumption is thus to resocialize people so they can change their concept of self, society and consuming itself (Williams, 1982).

McCracken (1988) described this mode of consumption as "accessible, modest, and dignified" (p. 23). He too considered consumer goods and services as expressive and symbolic referring to "the language of goods" (McCracken, 1998, p. 25). With this form of democratic consumption come egalitarianism and equality (Williams, 1982).

Twentieth Century Democratic Consumption (1900-1999)

Although consumerism was born in Western Europe (Stearns, 2006; Williams, 1982), latecomer North America left an indelible mark on the rest of the world. Events in the United States (US) influenced Canada, other Commonwealth nations, and many European countries (Horowitz, 2004).

Capitalism and economic freedom. The political call for people to consume intentionally was part of the early evolution of American consumerism (1920s and 1930s). The aim was to "connect purchasing their products with protecting the American way of life by supporting the war effort" (Horowitz, 2004, p. 21). Any concurrent calls for consumption as *democratic* for the good of community were stifled relative to calls for consumption as patriotic for the good of the nation. Efforts to "make a convincing link between democracy, the reform of capitalism, and lessened consumption" were undermined (Horowitz, 2004, p. 21). Democratic consumption was actively touted, but its uptake was thwarted at the time.

Political initiatives in the 1930s (e.g., the *New Deal* in response to the Depression era) entrenched a system supportive of bourgeoning consumerism. These initiatives helped people spend money. Examples of the *New Deal* include (a) a new social welfare system (social security, minimum wages, unemployment benefits); (b) a shored-up banking system (secure way to save for homes, cars and education); and (c) a stabilized economy via fiscal and monetary policies. These and other political initiatives all depended on consumption, which "was seen as critical to the economy" (Horowitz, 2004, p. 23) and to Western democracy.

Major pushback to this policy direction came in the form of Lewis

Mumford (American historian, sociologist, humanist) who argued that a democratic society depends on (a) cohesive families and communities and (b) self-restrained consumption rather than liberalism and the pursuit of materialistic self-gratification through capitalistic markets at the expense of families and communities (Horowitz, 2004). This was, in effect, a "wartime cry for democratic consumption [characterized as] chastened consumption [dependent on] nonmaterialistic values responsive to human needs and human purposes" (2004, p. 40). Mumford's (and likeminded) attempt to ensure democracy by pushing back against liberal capitalism and unchaste consumption failed however with economic freedom prevailing (Horowitz, 2004).

MacQuoid-Mason (1994) recognized economic freedom as a key principle of democracy. But this was not always so. Kroen (2004) recounted that "this positive connection of the consumer *as* the quintessential citizen, and free enterprise as the ideal medium for democracy, only came to prevail after the Second World War" (p. 709). Before that, people fighting for consumer cooperatives, labour unions, and a living wage "claimed that democracy depended on a critique of capitalism" (p. 710) not a full-on embracing of capitalism as a key principle of democracy. After the forties, however, "the informed consumer was the linchpin of freedom and democracy" (Kroen, 2004, p. 710) in the capitalistic market (see also Iacocca, 1984).

In more detail, after 1945, American discourse viewed "the consumer as an active agent of democratization... and the handmaiden of social democracy" (Kroen, 2004, p. 720). It is noteworthy that a handmaiden connotes someone of lowly status who serves others in the role of slave or servant. Whether intended or not, this view intimates that democracy cannot exist without people enslaved in the consumer role. Kroen asserted that, at this historical moment, consumers were "recognized as key actors in a democracy" (2004, p. 721). They became the bedrock of democracy, a sentiment echoed in the democratic principle of economic freedom (MacQuoid-Mason, 1994). This era actually formulated "consumption *as* democracy" (Kroen, 2004, p. 731) with this ideology migrating to the restructuring of postwar Europe via the American-led *Marshall Plan* intended to bolster the devastated European economy and world trade (Horowitz, 2004; Kroen, 2004). Consumerism as a building block of democracy went global.

Little (1993) referred to democratic consumption in his discussion of the approximately two-year journey (1947-1948) of the *Freedom Train* (an actual train housing a curated exhibition and educational program) commemorating the 160th signing of the American constitution. "Embedded in some of the [civic education] program's language and symbols ... was the idea that democratic consumption was a crucial measure of the American system of government. ...

The consumption theme ... was present and persistent enough that the celebrated democratic values and freedoms were often circumscribed to the amorphous national issues of abundance, growth" (p. 39). The curators of the *Freedom Train* exhibit "sought a unity that was rooted in free enterprise capitalism and the perception of economic abundance for business and consumers. By implication, the ability to purchase consumer goods was a tangible measure of abundance and inexorably tied to democratic principles" (Little, 1993, p. 46).

Toward the end of the twentieth century, Brown (1993) discounted the democratic principle of economic freedom in concert with capitalism when she argued that "no economy is based on individual choice[,] and the systems of institutions, social relationships, and power in modern capitalism foreclose democratic control of the economy" (p. 57). She maintained that when the education system solely trains workers to sustain the capitalistic system, which in turn depends on their consumer behaviour, people miss the opportunity to develop "capacities for social reason in communication necessary for shaping and participating in a democratic community" (p. 56). In this scenario, Brown (1993) claimed that the tradition of democracy had been assaulted by capitalism thereby crippling people's ability to promote the common good.

Welfare state. The literature review also revealed that the welfare state and democratic consumption are connected. The former emerged in the United States after the Great Depression via President Franklin D. Roosevelt's *New Deal*. In a welfare state, the government creates a system that protects and ensures the health and well-being of its citizens especially those in financial, physical or social need (e.g., unemployment insurance, pension plans, social welfare [food, shelter and otherwise], child benefits, veterans' benefits, workers' compensation) (Barr, 2020; Kessler-Harris & Vaudagna, 2017). This system of basic economic security and individual and social well-being (current state) and wellness (process) entails redistributing excess public funds by (a) giving money directly to individuals, (b) using money to create services for everyone or (c) some combination (Engellau, 1984).

From a different perspective, Engellau (1984) discussed the democratic consumption of surplus income in a welfare state. He explained that administrators of welfare states normally actively resist the ethics of capitalism whose basic tenet is that each person is responsible for their own *state*. The government (state) is not responsible – instead, capitalists assume that everyone is out for themselves (economic individualism). Adherents of this philosophy argue that self-reliance will push individuals to work harder, which in turn benefits society as a whole. Engellau (1984) proposed that affluence (i.e., an abundance of surplus wealth) can eventually kill a democratic welfare state, because the larger the welfare state grows, the more it eats into its surplus to

distribute benefits until there is no surplus left.

When *this* happens, the market has to take over thus leaving the welfare state by the wayside. Wealth is instead created and distributed according to neoliberal tenets in a capitalistic market (Engellau, 1984). For clarification, neoliberalism privileges privatization, deregulation, decentralization, nominal government intervention in markets, individualism (no concern for others), and materialism and consumerism to fuel the capitalistic economic model – property ownership, growth, development, and progress predicated on the elite's accumulation of money and wealth (McGregor, 2001).

*Consumer rights and strategies***.** In the mid-1900s, democratic consumption was linked with consumer rights. In the early fifties, the *Consumers Union* (renowned American consumer activist group) "reaffirmed [its] 'faith in a democratic society in which the production of goods and services is guided by the free choice of consumers'" (as cited in Hilton, 2009, p. 159). This sentiment especially represents a direct link between the democratic principle of economic freedom and democratic consumption.

In the sixties, President John F. Kennedy ushered in consumer rights and argued that if they are not respected, "'the national interest suffers'" (as cited in Hilton, 2009, p. 185). These rights were intended to be "the means to achieve the consumer democracy" (Hilton, 2009, p. 185). The original four consumer-interest pillars (information, choice, safety, voice) became the foundation for *Consumer International's* (CI) eight consumer rights (including redress, consumer education, healthy environment, basic needs). CI (2021) is a world federation of more than 200 national consumer organizations spanning 100 countries. These rights were eventually embraced by the United Nations (Hilton, 2009, McGregor, 2017). In effect, the concept of democratic consumption (although not necessarily called that) had gone viral.

Near the end of the century, Lohmann (1998) argued that "bringing consumption under more democratic control ... requires political action [and consumer strategies]" (p. 7). Key strategies include, first, people being aware of and then exposing how corporations conceal their "connections among consumption, production and power politics" (p. 7). Second, consumers can connect and communicate with labourers whose presence and involvement in the supply chain have been blocked by corporations protecting their pecuniary interests. These connections can pave the way for both (a) "a new, more civilized kind of negotiation over what reasonable consumption might consist of" (Lohmann, 1998, p. 7) and (b) more transparent pricing that acknowledges hidden oppression, exploitation, and repression. Harken the Fairtrade movement (Hassoun, 2019).

Twenty-first Century Democratic Consumption (2000-onward)

Welfare state and capitalism. Entering the next century, Kroen (2004) continued the discussion of the redistribution of wealth in a welfare state, wherein its decline saw "increased consumption as critical to social and political stability [and democracy]" (p. 729). Sassatelli (2007) bemoaned "the crises of the welfare system" (p. 125), explaining that the provision of basic needs and necessities cannot be efficiently provided through the market mechanism.

Pertinent to the argument herein is the idea that, in the process of a declining welfare state, several key principles of democracy are compromised leaving citizens at the mercy of the free market where they have to *fare* for themselves with no state concern for their *welfare*. Stroup (2007) downplayed this argument, asserting instead that enabling individuals to voluntarily consume a wide range of goods and services increases societal welfare. He affirmed "the apparent superior ability of economic freedoms to promote non-material measures of well-being in society" (p. 63). This improved well-being allegedly reflects the ability of neoliberal decentralization to heighten both market innovations and consumers' flexibility (Stroup, 2007).

Bonell and Hilton (2002) asserted that, through democratic consumerism, citizens in welfare states can use consumerist strategies to influence the formulation of policy and public goods and services instead of focusing on the delivery and receipt of said goods and services in the marketplace. At issue then is whether democracy or the market has failed. In a backhanded way, democratic consumerism defined thus can be used to challenge market consumerism, because inequalities in the social welfare state are addressed *before* they manifest in marketplace failures and inequalities (Hugman, 1994). The latter are staved off when people "influence the means [i.e., policy process] of developing products rather than choosing between finished products [using] consumerist strategies" (Bonell & Hilton, 2002, p. 29). Similarly, Stroup (2007) asserted that democratically determined public policies can superordinate (i.e., become more important than) individual economic freedoms and choice, which become subservient.

Ethical consumption. With a different focus on markets, Hussain (2012) discussed ethical consumption, liberal democracy, and whether consumers should use the market to pursue social change (e.g., democratic principles of justice, equality, rights, freedom). He claimed that people should view their decision to use their alleged consumer bargaining power to effect social change as "part of the wider political process, not a private purchasing decision" (p. 112). This stance reflects that citizens are embedded in a liberal democracy *as well as* a capitalistic marketplace. To that end, Hussain (2012) conceptualized

social change ethical consumerism (SCEC) and defined it as consuming in way that creates an economic incentive for others to do the same – akin to the nineteenth century notion of democratic consumption described by Williams (1982).

In preparation for this conceptualization, Hussain (2012) acknowledged three other types of ethical consumerism that reflect changes in *one's own* actions. (a) Clean-hands ethical consumerism involves avoiding certain merchandise so one is not implicated in immoral production practices. (b) Expressive ethical consumerism entails intentionally buying something to express one's personal beliefs, attitudes, or judgements about certain production, marketing, or retail practices. (c) Unmediated ethical consumerism involves changing one's own buying behaviour to advance a nonmarket agenda (e.g., to confront child labour).

SCEC strives instead to convince *others* to change things thereby leading to more fairness, justice, and equity for all. The responsibility of consumers in a liberal democracy is thus to find a balance between effecting change through (a) the market process *and* (b) the democratic process, which is informed by procedural values, institutions, and practices (see Table 1). Both approaches confront power with the former focused on marketplace power and the latter on political power (Hussain, 2012).

Hussain (2012) further explained that both the market and a democracy are mechanisms of social change but cautioned that relying solely on market transactions requires processes that threaten the principles of democracy. Instead, people should treat "the formal democratic process as the supreme system for making and changing social rules (including the rules of the market itself)" (p. 124). He proposed that people using SCEC would see themselves as representing society as whole. They are thus charged with using their consumer bargaining power to involve other affected parties to jointly create a solution to the issue, one that respects the principles of democracy (e.g., people's basic liberties and freedoms, their voice and participation in social decision making, and the rule of law) (see also Lohmann, 1998).

Democratic versus marketplace power. Like Hussain (2012), Hassoun (2020) discussed consumption, social change, and political philosophy (including democracy). She maintained that some procedural norms are essential to arguments justifying liberal democracy, asserting that "only democratic consumption respects [these] norms" (Hassoun, 2020, p. 150). Basic liberties (procedural norms) include freedom of thought, movement, assembly, and expression (Hussain, 2012). Hassoun (2020) posited that "consumption that promotes social change must respect [these] basic liberties and advance a reasonable conception of the common good" (p. 143). Otherwise, consumption

is construed as undemocratic (i.e., not adhering to democratic principles). To offset this possibility, people should view using their marketplace bargaining power as part of the wider democratic process. This perspective entails respect for several key principles of democracy: basic liberties, political tolerance and equality, and participation and deliberation in social and political life (Hassoun, 2020).

Using another tactic, Hassoun (2020) first asserted that democratic consumption is ethical because it promotes democratic change. Then she claimed that "if democracy is too central" (p. 10) in consumption it can prevent positive change for the common good. Therein she recognized the argument that it is alright to consume based on price alone (normally construed as undemocratic) *if* people "bring *Paerto* optimal improvements in preference satisfaction; they make at least some better off without making anyone worse off" (p. 145). This is an example of the democratic principle of economic freedom improving people's welfare.

Pragmatically, Mattheis (2019) claimed that "the tools of democratic consumerism broadly [include] activities which can challenge the foundation of our economy and political system" (pp. 9-10). He conceived democratic consumerism as limited to consumer decisions that merit the consideration of others' vision of the common good, which is necessary to bring about social change (including changes to the market) (see also Hussain, 2012). Not all consumer decisions are thus immediately political, nor do they have democratic implications – only those striving to bring democratic principles to bear. Respecting this caveat, Mattheis (2019) asserted that "consumers should *generally* conform to democratic considerations in their consumption decisions" (p. 10) and "our 'overall consumption basket' should be in accordance with democratic [principles]" (p. 12).

Diversity and power differentials. Democratic societies *are* societies of equals. In that spirit, democratic consumption depends on people viewing democracy and the actualization "of conditions of equal participation as the guideline for their general consumption behaviour" (Mattheis, 2019, p. 12). That is, people must recognize the power differentials that exist within the consumption process and then consume accordingly (Mattheis, 2019). People's use of their purchasing power "should be backed by a sensitivity to diverging conceptions of the good [and] be justifiable to other persons" (Mattheis, 2019, p. 11).

Similarly, Stearns (2006) conceptualized the democratization of consumerism as "homogenizing tendencies across group lines [whereby people of different class, ethnicity, gender, age, religion and locale eventually gain] access to consumerism" (p. 55). Stearns referred to this as the democratization

of consumer audiences thereby intimating egalitarianism – everyone is equal and deserving of the same rights and opportunities (key democratic principle).

Hilton (2009), in his discussion of global consumer activism, maintained that the sheer diversity of global voices advocating for the consumer interest intimates that consumption *is* a potentially democratic activity. A key principle of democracy *is* political tolerance of diversity where all voices are valued (MacQuoid-Mason, 1994) even in the consumer arena. As did Kroen (2004), Hilton (2009) mentioned American postwar "consumer democracy [whereby] consumers were able to exercise their citizenship not only at the ballot box but on a daily basis through their participation in the marketplace" (p. 55). Through the latter, everyone got to "participate in the good life" (Hilton, 2009, p. 55) while protecting Western democracy against other political ideologies (e.g., fascism and communism).

Analysis and Discussion of Common Threads and Patterns

Iterative readings of the results revealed several common threads woven through the democratic consumption literature: the common good, economic freedom and capitalism, welfare state, ethical consumption, and diverse consumer interest. There was a consensus that these elements are associated with democratic consumption but less agreement on how and in what direction. Also, the focus of democratic consumption (i.e., specific principles) changed over time.

Common Good

The most widely held idea was that democratic consumption serves *the* common good, with noteworthy mention that those writing about this connection did not use the term *a* common good, which has economic theory connotations (Crespo, 2016). Authors often used the term the common good without defining it. Put simply, if something is good for the commons (i.e., the community or populace as a whole), it benefits the public as a whole and improves the general welfare of most or all citizens (Lee, 2016).

Although the common good is normally viewed as manifesting in the realm of politics and public service (Lee, 2016), scholars expounding on democratic consumption also linked it with the realm of marketplace transactions. They argued that if people respect the principles of democracy when they consume, they will enhance the common good. Conversely, purely self-interested consumer behaviour will detract from the common good. That is, a narrow focus on the consumer self (necessary for capitalism) can draw attention away from democratic principles such as transparency, accountability, equality, equity, and human rights (Brown, 1993; Hassoun, 2020; Mattheis, 2019; Williams, 1982).

Economic Freedom and Capitalism

A second common thread was the link between economic freedom (a key democratic principle) and democratic consumption. Freedom means an unrestricted right or power to think, speak or act. It is Old English *freodom*, 'power of self-determination, state of free will' (Harper, 2021). Freedom in an economy refers to (a) the market and economic system being relatively free of government interference; (b) workplaces respecting labourers' rights; and (c) all citizens being free to own private goods, experience services, and accumulate wealth (producers and consumers). The assumption is that this freedom makes economies and labourers more productive, markets more competitive and efficient, and it gives consumers more choice (MacQuoid-Mason, 1994).

Two clear lines of thought emerged in the literature. (a) If people do participate in the capitalistic economy exercising the democratic principle of economic freedom, they are being democratic consumers. Conversely, (b) critiquing or refraining from participating in the capitalistic economy constitutes democratic consumption too, because it favours democratic principles other than economic freedom. If participating in a market economy as a consumer impinges on democratic principles, then consumption can be characterized as undemocratic (Kroen, 2004; Little, 1993).

This ambivalent relationship between democratic consumption and economic freedom reflects the iffy connection between economics and democracy. Western (liberal) democracy depends on (a) free trade (nominal government involvement in economic affairs), (b) laissez faire capitalism (economy controlled by trade and industry not government), (c) *economic* individualism (focus on individuals' freedom and rights relative to the collective or common good), (d) the rule of law and (e) the protection of rights and freedoms so that trade can continue unabated (Harpin, 1999). Conversely, as a principle of democracy, economic freedom means people must be able to choose where they work, be protected in that work, spend their earnings, and own what they buy (private property) (MacQuoid-Mason, 1994). The sketchy element of this for democratic consumption is the consumption part – how to do this without being undemocratic?

Welfare State

The link between the welfare state and democratic consumption is a third theme that manifested in the literature. Most scholars agreed that the loss of the welfare state paved the way for economic and market superiority (including consumption). When consumers are faced with *faring* for themselves in the free market, they are less able to consume for the *welfare* of the state (i.e., the

common good). Their own personal welfare takes precedence, and the only way they can improve it is to consume in the capitalistic market; government assistance is curtailed or eliminated when the welfare state declines (Kroen, 2004; Sassatelli, 2007).

Democracies and welfare states go hand in hand. Social welfare is supposed to ensure greater equality by providing social benefits, protecting working people, and constraining capitalism (Kessler-Harris & Vaudagna, 2017). The recent and ongoing transformation of the global economic order (through massive redistributions of income and wealth in favor of the elite) has challenged the welfare state and its fate. These challenges have manifested in constrained social movement; increased, displaced migrant workers; infringement of family and gendered rights; and more – all of which drain national surplus (Kessler-Harris & Vaudagna, 2017). Consumption within this context is undemocratic if it further threatens the welfare state. Conversely, democratic consumption can shore up social welfare (Bonell & Hilton, 2002; Engellau, 1984; Hassoun, 2020; Hugman, 1994; Stroup, 2007).

Ethical Consumption

Fourth, ethical consumerism was associated with democratic consumption notably when the former concerned getting others to change how *they* consume so the common good is privileged. Consumption that is ethical takes into account the morality of the purchasing situation (McGregor, 2010). Democracy and the common good are both anchored in morality (Hussain, 2012) – the rightness and wrongness of a situation – and concern whether harm ensues from a course of action. This harm is mitigated somewhat if consumption is democratic, meaning it considers the impact of consuming *on* democratic principles: human rights, equity and equality, transparency and accountability, the rule of law, and tolerance of diversity and a range of voices and perspectives (Hussain, 2012; Hassoun, 2020; Horowitz, 2004; Williams, 1982).

Diverse Consumer Interest

Finally, democratic consumption encompasses a concern for the consumer interest. McGregor (2012) explained that "it is in the *best interest* of *consumers* (to their benefit or advantage) to have marketplace failures (the *conditions* that affect the realization of their interests) and resultant consumer issues (if a power imbalance arises) dealt with effectively and expediently, in a sustainable manner" (p. 4, emphases in original). The consumers' interest is affected by (a) consumers' characteristics and circumstances; (b) relationships between sellers and consumers; (c) major social issues; (d) economic and fiscal policies; (e)

corporate, marketing and retail behaviour; and (f) the integrity of specific goods and services (McGregor, 2012).

Democratic consumption deals with both (a) diverse voices speaking out for the consumer interest and (b) speaking out for diverse consumers' interests (Hilton, 2009; Horowitz, 2004; Lohmann, 1998; Stearns, 2006). The former pertains to consumer activists from all over the world speaking out for the interests of consumers. This community of activists reflects the reality that consumers are not homogenous. Because they are diverse in their identity, interests, and concerns, a collection of diverse voices is needed to voice consumers' interests. This diversity culminated in the formation and continuing influence of *Consumers International* originally called the *International Organization of Consumer Unions* (IOCU) (Horowitz, 2004).

Per speaking out for diverse interests, consumers' interests *are* diverse, because consumers themselves differ on many aspects (Stearns, 2006): culture, religion, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, locale, income, occupation, access to technology and so on. Any or a combination of these and other factors in concert with businesses' behaviour can expose consumers to situations where their interests (i.e., benefits or advantages) are threatened or compromised. Democratic consumption concerns itself with these eventualities, because democracy respects political tolerance of diversity, equity, equality, and human rights, which are closely tied to consumer rights (McGregor, 2010; Stearns, 2006). Mattheis (2019) urged people to be cognizant of the power differentials informing consumption and the consumers' interest so their purchase decisions can be justifiable to others.

Patterns Over the Centuries

This think piece sought evidence of democratic consumption in the literature, which scholars traced back over three centuries. The focus tended to shift over time with each century concerned with different democratic principles (see Table 2).

Table 2
Democratic Consumption and Democratic Principles Over the Centuries

19th Century (1800s)	**20th Century (1900s)**	**21st Century (2000s)**
- egalitarianism and equality - human rights (dignity)	- economic freedom - human rights (dignity) - the rule of law	- equality - economic freedom - the rule of law

- protected rights and freedoms
- political tolerance of diversity
- citizen participation
- accountability and transparency

In the 1800s, democratic consumption was clearly associated with both the common good and resocializing people to consume for human dignity and simplicity. Goods and services were symbolic (i.e., imbued with meaning) and construed as a means of communicating with others. People were urged to spend in such a way that convinced others to live more simply so that egalitarianism and equality (democratic principles) could prevail in society.

In the 1900s (20th century), the focus shifted especially in North America where consumption was linked with saving Western (liberal) democracy. In the wake of two World Wars, the Great Depression, and the first Cold War (communism and fascism threats), political voices called for democratic consumption to preserve the liberal democracy while businesses called for it to advance laissez faire capitalism. Both the welfare state and capitalism battled it out with capitalism coming ahead as the forerunner. The principle of economic freedom dominated this century in concert with the rule of law so the competitive marketplace could prevail. Economic individualism trumped collectivism. Consumption that threatened these principles was construed as undemocratic by some and democratic by others. Democratic consumption also became associated with consumer rights and human rights.

So far, in the early 2000s (21st century), democratic consumption has clearly been associated with positive social change, democratic change, ethical consumption, and consumer activism to protect the diverse consumer interest, which is threatened by declining welfare states and rising global, corporate-led capitalism. Concerns for diversity in interests, perspectives, voices, and such prevail. The end goal is egalitarianism, accountability, transparency, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights and freedoms especially freedom of movement, assembly, thought, and expression. Consumer rights remain linked with human rights, and people are encouraged to influence public policy to thwart marketplace failures before they happen.

As evident in Table 2, several democratic principles were consistently linked with democratic consumption (e.g., economic freedom, equality, freedom and rights, and the rule of law) with the current century the most expansive in its inclusion of the 12 rights set out in Table One. Five democratic principles were not linked with democratic consumption: an independent judiciary; control of government's abuse of power (especially in the marketplace but also in the policy arena); anything to do with elections; and multiparty systems (although somewhat

covered by consumer global activism for diverse consumer voices, perspectives, and interests). Their exclusion merits further exploration in future research.

Conclusions

The intent of a think piece is to "test ideas and arguments as a precursor to [future empirical] research" (McGregor, 2018, p. 474). Using an amalgamation of literature and the author's thoughts and intellectual insights, a case was made for the merit of an idea. In this instance, literature pursuant to democratic consumption was reviewed and presented to stimulate others' engagement with this idea. As noted, there was a consensus about five ideas often associated with democratic consumption but less so on their effect (i.e., direct or inverse, positive or negative): the common good, economic freedom and capitalism, welfare state, ethical consumption, and diverse consumer interest. Also, the focus of democratic consumption temporally shifted with each century being concerned with different democratic principles.

"Think pieces are legitimate tools for contributing to the cumulative improvement of theoretical knowledge" (McGregor, 2018, p. 470). Their development depends on convincing arguments tendered with limited corroborating empirical evidence. The goal is to raise questions and challenge thinking while anticipating that others will validate the idea through future study and experimentation if they judge it meritorious (McGregor, 2018). Consumer, philosophy, political, social welfare, economic, and peace and conflict theorists are thus encouraged to tease out what constitutes democratic consumption defined tentatively herein as behaviour having to do with consumption informed by, reflective of, and influenced by democratic principles for a myriad of reasons.

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