

EXPANDED ABSTRACT

Political consumption in Argentina: strategies developed by non-profit organizations

In the current context of depletion of natural resources and global warming, the model of consumption of opulent Northern countries – replicated by many Southern countries – has become one of the causes of the environmental crisis and a source of social conflict. This is why it is especially interesting to reflect on alternative forms of consumption that stem from a critical analysis of the prevailing model and seek to generate social reform based on daily actions.

Political consumption, understood as a new social movement, has so far had a modest theoretical trajectory and limited — although not negligible — impact in practical terms. In addition, in Argentina, the country that is the subject of this research, political consumption has barely been studied to date. It is hoped that this research project will add both academic and civic value to a little-explored area.

The research focuses on analysing the role of Argentina's not-for-profit organisations (NPOs) in promoting this phenomenon.

On the theoretical side, we approximate institutional theory and the relationship with corporate social responsibility (CSR) to the NPOs' capacity to influence the generation of changes in company and consumer attitudes, that is to say, to have an impact on the supply and demand for goods and services. Therefore, NPOs are analysed as civil society articulators to generate changes that point to a model of sustainable consumption.

Along these lines, following Bendell (2007), NPOs can develop different types of strategies to influence corporations, depending on whether they develop collaborative or confrontational relations and whether these are within or outside the market.

The practical side is the repertory of actions the political consumer can undertake, either individually or collectively. Again, we determine the typology using two core ideas: whether the actions are purchasing or not purchasing and whether they occur by means of conventional or alternative channels.

After the theoretical framework, we present an analysis of the political consumption context in Argentina, firstly through the evolution of the not-for-profit sector from colonial times up to the present; secondly by means of the model proposed by Thøgersen (2010), which includes market as well as poli-

tical factors; and thirdly, taking into account the contemporary characteristics of the not-for-profit sector. From this analysis we deduce that even though the Argentinian context cannot be called adverse, it is far from presenting the conditions of those countries where the movement is more developed.

The method used in this research is case studies. Specifically, using theoretical criteria, six organisations were selected according to their area of activity, size and geographical scope. All had to comply with two criteria: defence of a sustainable development model as a central axis of their activity and the presence of political consumption or one of its types of action as a line of work or objective.

In order to get to know the initiatives put into practice by different NPOs, firstly a process of investigation and detailed analysis of webpages, annual reports and profiles on social networks was undertaken; secondly, a telephone interview of a leading person in each organisation; and finally, an analysis of their presence in the media.

As far as the results are concerned, we observe that, in relation to the assessment by the NPOs in the Argentinian context of political consumption, all the people interviewed agree that it is a very underdeveloped movement in this country, pointing particularly to the scarcity of demand.

We have divided the global analysis of the main initiatives developed by the NPOs into three parts.

The first relates to the strategies of change used to foment political consumption. Here, going back to the typology of Bendell (2007), we find that strategies based on cooperation are in the overwhelming majority and that the predominant place of activity is outside the market.

The second gathers together the alternatives on which the NPOs have an impact, in relation to the actions the consumer can take. In contrast to the previous part, we observe a more even distribution among the four defined types. Nevertheless, we can highlight the most recurrent: smart shopping in fair trade and organic agriculture and simplification centred on recycling, reusing, energy saving and reducing the level of consumption.

The third part refers to the agent on which the organisations act in their projects and campaigns. We observe an important focus on the impact on citizens, well above that on companies and the public administration.

From the analysis of the results we can extract different conclusions. In their role as political consumption mobilisers, Argentinian NPOs support establishing cooperative relationships with the other party without seeking their own economic profit. Therefore, the initiatives they fight for with corporations have less weight. At the same time, in the range of actions that the organisations studied propose to carry out with political consumers we observe an inclination towards alternative forms, smart shopping and simplifying, which implies promoting a change in the system.

Taking into account the two previous conclusions, the following result is coherent: a predominance of bottom-up strategies of change which centre on the impact on citizens to the detriment of directing efforts towards the most concentrated centres of power.

We can extract implications from the Argentinian case that can be applied to other scenarios in which political consumption is not very developed and where NPOs focus on aid rather than on transformation: changes will depend to a great extent on the efforts of consumers and small businesses and corporations will not feel strongly pressurised to alter their conduct significantly. In this sense, we can certainly consider that the intervention of governments and a growing awareness on the part of citizens is needed to obtain substantial improvements regarding human rights, which both political consumption and CSR can promote, as well as generating major advances on the path of sustainable development.

KEY WORDS: Political consumption, Argentina, non-profit organizations, change strategies, responsible consumption, corporate social responsibility.