

**Social Activism and Neoliberalization: The Public Interest Research  
Groups**

**Research Thesis**

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## Introduction

The unprecedented freedom which our society offers its members has arrived...together with unprecedented impotence.

Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*

The amount of “choice” in the U.S. at the onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century largely seems unbounded. Indeed, the variety of choices offered to most Americans seems to lend credence to the idea of having reached an unprecedented stage of personal freedom and new heights of individual liberty. This seeming freedom, however, has unfurled concomitantly with widening economic disparities and persistent racial, gender, and sexual inequalities, compelling recognition that, in spite of the expanse of choices laid out before us, very little seems to have fundamentally change. Indeed, as Zygmunt Bauman argues:

Contemporary society has given to the ‘hospitality to critique’ an entirely new sense and has invented a way to accommodate critical thought and action while remaining immune to the consequences of that accommodation, and so emerging unaffected and unscathed—reinforced rather than weakened—from the tests and trials of the open-house policy (Bauman 23).

Unprecedented proliferation of individual choice at the expense of growing economic and social inequalities has proven to be a critical feature of the economic, political, and cultural project of neoliberalism, emerging in the midst of the 1970s economic downturn

and continuing to dominate the twenty-first century social landscape; choice in the terms of the pro-business ethic of neoliberalism, then, usually digresses to consumer choice and is limited as such.

To understand how contemporary social critique and change has been stunted in spite of novel freedoms of choice, it is helpful to look at dominant methods of social activism since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Lobbyist and litigation organizations like the Public Interest Research Groups (the PIRGs) provide insight into the operations of social activism in the midst of neoliberalization. Thus, through contextualizing the PIRGs and similar lobbyist organizations within the neoliberal shift of the 1970s and understanding how their approach effectively plays within the terms of neoliberalism through commodifying political and social involvement, we can demonstrate how this popular approach is problematic to the incitement of radical social change within the U.S.

### **The Rise of Neoliberalism**

To understand and effectively critique the PIRGs' approach to social justice and change, it is first necessary to situate the organization historically within the dominant social, economic, and political structures taking root in late in the twentieth century and shaping our cultural, economic, and political landscape today.

Social theorist Zygmunt Bauman suggests that we are currently entering an unprecedented stage of "liquid modernity" in which social relations and institutions that formerly had a sense of permanency and solidity are disintegrating and entering states of perpetual flux. Though this sense of liquidity has consistently been a defining characteristic of modernity, distinguishing it from previous eras, Bauman argues that this

ostensible “second modernity” is novel in its radical liberation of business and enterprise (Bauman 2); it is through this increased liberalization of markets that social relations and institutions undergo reconstitution to support rapidly changing market trends catering to a society of individuals. This consequent sense of unprecedented individual freedom to choose and act through enterprise and consumerism legitimizes and further entrenches the economic as the unwieldy basis upon which social and political institutions are built or destroyed, posing new issues to the ideas of social criticism and transformation.

This liquidity, however, is nothing new to modern social formations. The onset of modernity is marked by a “profaning of the sacred” or “disavowing and dethroning the past, and first and foremost ‘tradition’” (Bauman 4). Social relations and systems of obligations and loyalties that were considered irrelevant to the rational operations of enterprise were broken apart. This “melting of the solids” indicated the liberation of business enterprise from the network of social, familial, and ethical obligations within which it was previously implicated, leaving social bonds and formations open to the determining force of the economy. As Bauman puts it:

[The economic], now the “basis” of social life, gave all life’s other realms the status of “superstructure”—to wit, an artifact of the “basis” whose sole function was to service its smooth and continuing operation. (Bauman 4)

Thus, modernity is characterized by the constant cycle of breaking down social formations and obligations to allow for greater economic flexibility and the subsequent recasting of social structures and networks according to those economic forces. This

process is evident in the emergence of systems of class from the structure of familial estates and hereditary ownership in the nineteenth century. Bauman argues that, again, we are undergoing a shift as the solids of our current social structure are in the process of being melted. This time, however, it occurs at the micro level of social cohabitation—the individual and his/her involvement in collective projects and actions (Bauman 13).

Decidedly, Bauman posits, our form of modernity is characterized by deregulation and privatization, whose social effects he describes in the following way:

What used to be considered a job to be performed by human reason seen as the collective endowment and property of the human species has been fragmented ('individualized'), assigned to individual guts and stamina, and left to individuals' management and individually administered resources (29).

Essentially, this “second modernity” can be understood most clearly as a liquefaction of the collective and mutual responsibility in favor of the individual and individual freedom, and this process can be viewed as a product as well as a tool of a larger project of deregulation and liberalization of trade and business, a “releasing of the brakes” on the financial sector.

This push toward increased liberation of trade and business effectively began at the onset of the 1970s, with the breaking down of the Keynesian, state-interventionist economic policies that had reigned on the political and economic landscape since the Depression era. With rising rates of inflation and unemployment, alternatives were called

for to avoid inevitable depression; the interests of liberating corporations and businesses from state control and regulation began coming to the fore of economic discussions. This program of free market policy had been fomenting in the margins of economic and political discourse since the 1940s, and it could likely be understood as a response to growing global as well as national trends toward socialism, communism, and even anarchism, which advocated radical resource redistribution.

As geographer David Harvey puts it, proponents and creators of this economic program labeled themselves “neoliberals,” maintaining “a fundamental commitment to ideals of personal freedom” through an adherence to free market principles of economics; these principles worked, ideally, in opposition to any state intervention in the economy as well as any centralized state planning (Harvey 20). From its inception, neoliberal theory held individual freedom as the primary value of civilization itself--maintained through rule of law--and proposed free market economics as the means of expanding and preserving this freedom, thus casting all other potential social and economic organizations as suspect in values. This sentiment is clearly reflected in the founding statement of the Mont Pelerin Society, the group of economists and philosophers who first expounded this theory:

The central values of civilization are in danger. Over large stretches of the earth's surface the essential conditions of human dignity and freedom have already disappeared. In others they are under constant menace from the development of current tendencies of policy. The position of the individual and the voluntary group are progressively undermined by the extension of arbitrary power. Even

that most precious possession of Western Man, freedom of thought and expression, is threatened by the spread of creeds which, claiming the privilege of tolerance when in the position of a minority, seek only to establish a position of power in which they can suppress and obliterate all views but their own

The group holds that these developments have been fostered by the growth of a view of history which denies all absolute moral standards and by the growth of theories which question the desirability of the rule of law. It holds further that they have been fostered by a decline of belief in private property and the competitive market; for without the diffused power and initiative associated with these institutions it is difficult to imagine a society in which freedom may be effectively preserved (Harvey 20).

As the U.S. entered into uncertain financial times in the 1970s, at the heels of some of the largest radical social movements in U.S. history, the possibility of a reconfiguration of politics and economics favoring a more socialistic downward wealth redistribution became tangible. Harvey argues that economic elites, feeling a palpable threat to the capitalistic social order, subscribed heavily to the neoliberal doctrine, which reinscribed a fundamental faith in the free market over which they reigned. There is strong evidence to support that the neoliberal turn is to some degree associated with the restoration of class power and economic elites. Indeed, Harvey posits:

The redistributive effects and increasing social inequality have in fact been such a persistent feature of neoliberalization as to be regarded as structural to the whole

project. (24)

The definite fear of the disintegration of market policy and the rise of more socialistic economic and political tendencies was exemplified by newly appointed Supreme Court justice Lewis Powell in 1971. In a memo to Richard Nixon, Powell stated that “criticism of and opposition to the US free enterprise system had gone too far and that ‘the time had come . . . for the wisdom, ingenuity and resources of American business to be marshaled against those who would destroy it’” (Harvey 43). This massive revival of business ethics would include political, economic and cultural strategies—ranging from influence in universities to media and courts—that would “change how individuals think ‘about the corporation, the law, culture, and the individual’” (Harvey 43).

A prime example of the implementation of the neoliberal project is the corporate turnaround of New York City after its fiscal crisis in the 1970s. After decades of deindustrialization and suburbanization, the urban center of the city was in decay, the solution to which had previously been to increase public employment and aid. In the 1970s, however, Nixon reduced federal aid to workers; a powerful group of investment bankers then pushed the city into bankruptcy by refusing to bridge the city’s longstanding debt. The consequent bail out included the construction of financial institutions that took over the city’s budgetary planning, effectively squeezing out the influence of democratically elected politicians. The new institutions further reduced public funding to education, public health, and transportation, curbing the influence and abilities of labor unions and other collective bargaining groups. These austerity measures largely left the



working class of New York demoralized and resigned as investment bankers were then free to reshape the New York landscape to create a “good business climate”(47). As Harvey puts it, this restructuring included selling the city as a cultural center, emphasizing “the liberty of consumer choices, not only with respect to particular products but also with respect to lifestyles, modes of expression, and a wide range of cultural practices.” More succinctly, investment bankers and businesses focused on “increasing consumer niche choices” as well as “restoring” or gentrifying neighborhoods, effectively marginalizing lower working classes and redistributing wealth and choice to those most able to consume already.

Thus, under the guise of preserving individual freedom, supporters of neoliberal theory launched a political and economic project that, contrary to the theory, included the coercion and take over of state apparatuses by financial institutions, which included slashing funding for social and public programs and dissolving social solidarities to make way for a business ethic. This project and new business ethic not only involved the drastic transformation of economic policy and state and public institutions; it also contained, as Margaret Thatcher put it, the “object of chang[ing] the soul” (Harvey 23).

Increasingly, individual freedom was recast in terms of individual consumer choice and people encouraged to conceptualize themselves as consumers in the public sphere. This conceptualization is fraught with inequalities as this means “the fullness of freedom for those whose income, leisure and security need no enhancing, and a mere pittance of liberty for the people, who may in vain attempt to make use of their democratic rights to gain shelter from the owners of property” (37).

## The Cultural Politics of (Neo)Liberalism

This inequity of the class system is characterized by an unequal distribution of wealth, resources, and political power and is underpinned by racism, sexism, and heterosexism. These inequalities are often obscured by Liberal capitalist rhetoric, which organizes social life through the imposition of arbitrary categories of the state, economy, civil society, and the family, which are, in turn, deemed either of public or private concern. It is in this distinction between public and private that inequalities--not only of wealth and power, but of race, gender, and sexual orientation that cut across the capitalist social structure--are masked. Indeed, queer theorist Lisa Duggan, in her book *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, argues that racial, gender, and sexual inequalities are deeply embedded in the Liberal capitalist social hierarchy:

Neoliberalism, a late twentieth-century incarnation of Liberalism, organizes material and political life *in terms of* race, gender, and sexuality as well as economic class and nationality, or ethnicity and religion. But the categories through which Liberalism (and thus also neoliberalism) classifies human activity and relationships *actively obscure* the connections among these organizing terms (Duggan 3).

Liberal theory (and, consequently, neoliberal theory) did not emerge, as is often presumed, from a neutral, rational space; it developed, as all theories, from a certain historical moment rife with general assumptions about race, gender, and sexuality and is,

consequently, heavily influenced by those assumptions. As Duggan explains, one of the most significant events to happen in the development of Liberalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the elimination of the requirement of property ownership to vote and participate in the state; formal equality in the eyes of the state was then given to all white males. Thus, participation in the public sphere of the state and civil society was marked by whiteness and maleness rather than by economic property rights; subsequently, the economy and family were increasingly seen as--at least rhetorically--private (Duggan 5).

The argument is remarkable in that it demonstrates how equal public participation in the state was understood, as Duggan states, *in terms of* race and gender, which effectively marginalized women, immigrants, and African Americans from involvement in the public, political life of the state. Inequalities among race, gender and sexuality in the economy and the family were legitimized by marking those categories as private, controlled by individual interests and not the state. It is in this way that women were structurally subordinated to men, relegated to the heterosexual family which was dominated by a male head of household, and blatantly racist institutions, like slavery, could be condoned under the private control of the economy. As Duggan puts it, “the formal equality of state participation could more easily be defined as distinct from the ‘natural,’ ‘private,’ inequalities of developing industrial capitalism in the U.S.” (Duggan 7).

Over a century later, our understandings of the political, economic and cultural continue to be dominated by Liberal theory; the central analytical debate in Liberalism is to determine to what extent the state should be involved in the economy and family life, essentially to demarcate the boundaries of what is private and public. This fluctuating

boundary of private/public continues to be underpinned by hierarchies of race and gender that cut across the class system. Indeed, Duggan points out that the disintegration and reduction of social solidarities and federal social safety nets propelled by the corporatism of neoliberalism was achieved through valorizing concepts of privatization and personal responsibility, which mask inequalities that have become endemic to the capitalist class order. Duggan goes so far as to argue that “the goal of raising corporate profits has never been pursued separately from the rearticulation of hierarchies of race, gender, and sexuality” (Duggan 14).

In sum, neoliberal theory ostensibly holds the individual and individual rights as sacrosanct and attempts to uphold them, ideally, through greater liberalization of the markets, which includes greater privatization of public resources and businesses and less state involvement in the presumably private interactions of the economy. However, the valorized concepts of privatization and personal responsibility, so central to the rhetoric of the neoliberal project, are not socially neutral as they “[join] economic goals with cultural values while obscuring the identity politics and upwardly redistributive impetus of neoliberalism” (Duggan 14).

### **Transitions in Activism**

What does activism look like in the midst of a general breakdown in social solidarities and the rise of a new consumerist individualism? Or when broad-based social movements dissolve in a growing corporatist practicality? Or during a time in which social inequalities are further entrenched and masked through a reified individualism advanced by rampant privatization? In their 1979 article “Student Activism in the 1970s:

Transformation, Not Decline,” Arthur Levine and Keith Wilson argue that that activism looks a lot like the Public Interest Research Groups, a student activist subset of the legislation and litigation organizations that Lisa Duggan dubs the “Civil Rights Lobby” (Duggan 20).

Writing as the 1970s drew to a close—a decade in which the radical demonstrations of the 60s had much abated and the student activist was generally presumed dead—Levine and Wilson posit that, instead, the 70s bore witness to a radical transformation in student activism, indicative of the “evolution of a new mood in the nation and on its campuses” (Levine & Wilson 627). This new mood, Levine and Wilson argue, could be typified by the successful tax revolt heavily influenced by California Republican Howard Jarvis in 1978.

Where John F Kennedy could be seen as the “man on horseback” for the 60s era of broad social critique and mass demonstrations, Howard Jarvis could be understood as that emblematic man for the 70s and the following decades. As Kennedy famously challenged the nation to become more active citizens in his inauguration address in 1961, the 1978 tax revolt presaged by the passage of Proposition 13 in California could be representative of a nation feeling that they were being asked to do *too* much for their country. Proposition 13 effectively made any increases in tax rates on property extremely difficult, which in turn cut state and local funding for public resources like libraries, public schools, and city services. The bill’s successful passage sparked similar antitax sentiments nation-wide and could possibly be a significant contributing factor to Ronald Reagan’s election to presidency in 1980.

Thus, Howard Jarvis’ emergence as the embodiment of the dominant 1970s

cultural ethos marked a significant change in underlying economic, political, and cultural currents, as Levine and Wilson state:

Howard Jarvis began preaching his message of individual rights contemporaneously with John Kennedy's exhortation of individual responsibility to the community. For the Jarvis philosophy to eclipse the then popular Kennedy position has required a fundamental shift in the American world view--a basic change in our perception of the American community and our place within it (Levine & Wilson 630).

This change, the two writers argue, is indicative of a national rise in individual ascendancy, or declining community ascendancy, which they aptly dub "meism":

This emphasis on 'me' is what differentiates periods of individual ascendancy from periods of community ascendancy. The former are hedonistic emphasizing the primacy of duty to one's self, and the latter are more ascetic stressing the primacy of duty to others. Individual ascendancy is concerned principally with rights and community ascendancy with responsibilities (Levine & Wilson 631).

This broad reconceptualization of the self in relation to the community occurring in the 1970s is represented in descriptions of college students at the end of the decade; the most common adjectives used by university faculty to depict the majority of college students in 1978 were "career-oriented"; "concerned with self"; "concerned with material success";

“well-groomed”; and “practical” (Levine & Wilson 633). These descriptions are relatively sedate, stressing an individual concern that stands in rather stark contrast to the radical campus unrest and student solidarity prevalent in 1969, a year in which mass student protests were ranked among the most pressing issues facing the nation (Levine & Wilson 629). It is little wonder, then, that student concerns and methods of activism would also undergo radical transformation in response to a growing “meism” in an increasingly business-inspired landscape.

Student interest groups began emerging prolifically toward the beginning of the 1970s, employing, as Levine and Wilson argue, “new forms of activism and the expansion of several existing types which were not previously considered part of the dominant motif of student protest” (Levine & Wilson 633). This included increased lobbying and litigation for social change as it particularly pertained to university and college student interest. Levine and Wilson hail these techniques as “less dangerous, more practical, and more individual” than tactics employed in the 60s and are consistent with the shift in national attitudes in the 1970s (Levine & Wilson 635).

In keeping with the increasing sense of individual ascendancy, these lobbyist groups epitomized the spirit of “meism” in that they were concerned mainly with the rights of individuals and focused on improving conditions for single groups of people (Levine & Wilson 636). Student interest organizations also represented a splintering of student concern from one or two commonly related causes to multiple individual issues to be tackled singularly through state apparatuses. Among the most prevalent and influential of this growing student lobby were the Public Interest Research Groups.

## **PIRG and Power**

The Public Interest Research Groups were the brainchild of independent politician Ralph Nader and were launched on several college campuses throughout the Northeast in 1971. Toward the end of the 1960s, Nader began to critically question the structure and content of higher education in the US, concerned that students were given few opportunities and venues to implement the theories of social change learned in class. In his article “Student Power 101”, he argues that the contemporary student has little idea of what it means to be an effective citizen, which, he posits, includes knowledge of “how to influence city hall, how to relate to Congress . . . and how the tax system operates” (Nader 47). Nader acknowledges the powerful influence of corporate interest in politics but poses state policy as the ultimate appeal for social change, a view he emphasizes in the following way:

Indeed, [students] know next to nothing about how power operates in our society. How many political science students have spent a day, a week, or a month in their state capital, seeing how laws are really passed, observing the influences that pull and tug on legislators? How many have studied up close the willingness of government agencies to ignore their regulatory responsibilities in the face of corporate political power (Nader 48).

Thus, as Nader recognizes the threat of a corporatist influence in politics as well as the university system, he suggests the formation of a more powerful student lobby to combat it, as well as the creation of lucrative careers for post grads in the growing non-profit



sector of the economy. This conviction is evident in the structure of PIRG, which, as Nader explains, “[applies] student research to real-life issues whose solutions are pursued through the legislative process” (Nader 49). In this way, students “[learn] about the legislative process, lobbying, and backstage power plays (Nader 50).

To generate a successful lobby effort to combat corporate influence in politics, it is necessary to define and generate a particular constituency to call upon when needed; this constituency must also be conceptualized a particular way within the presumably public sphere of the state to have greater political clout. For a fledgling and growing PIRG in the 1970s, this constituency consisted predominantly of college students, and one of the main goals became “increasing the stature of students in the eyes of the legislators, community leaders, and powerful educational bureaucracies” (Senia 28).

This process also included creating a firm internal structure for the organization in which annual dues were collected from students at a number of campuses; formal internships were offered for research, legislation, and litigation experience; and offices were staffed with full time directors to ensure the “professional” conduct of all PIRG chapters (Senia 30). The ultimate aim was to guarantee that educational leaders and politicians hear a student interest voice, and thus recognize “the importance of the student ‘as a consumer’ and the student ‘as a citizen’” (Senia 31).

The New York PIRG (NYPIRG) chapter became particularly prevalent in the mid-1970s and provides a typical example of the operations of the organization at that time; it also serves as a concrete representation of the activist transformation of the decade. The organization essentially materialized Ralph Nader’s desire to combine (as a reviewer of the organization in the 1970s put it) “the twin tenets of educational reform

and social change into a student-based group that would conduct consumer price surveys and sales fraud studies and push for legislative reform measure and voice environmental concerns” (Senia 31).

NYPIRG was independently funded and professionally staffed and directed by recent college graduates whose main responsibilities consisted of maintaining control of the quality of work carried out by the students. The aim of the organization was to “represent a well-defined student constituency on specific political issues” which were chosen ideally through student interest (Senia 32); however, most of the more intensive, attention-yielding projects consisted of uncovering sales and tax frauds in order to protect the consumer. Among the more notable of these projects in the 1970s were the consumer price surveys that exposed the incompetence of hearing aid sales in Queens, NY, the overcharge of prescriptions medications in lower income areas of New York, as well as the exposure of property tax inequities within the state. Also of wide appeal were the comparison of local supermarket prices in the state (Senia 32).

These findings prompted and informed specific legislation and litigation battles to essentially provide greater state regulation of the economy and protect NYPIRG’s constituents: the consumers. Student reports were released to the public via available media outlets to raise public awareness of the investigated issues.

Ultimately, the PIRGs represent a rather radical shift in student activism in the 1970s, a time in which the growing popularity of neoliberal policy was unleashing market forces while breaking apart social safety nets and solidarities and shaping a cultural ethos of individual ascendancy. The PIRGs serve as a particularly successful subset of a growing activist trend toward the formulation of special interest groups to represent an

increasingly fractioned and specialized public. In this proliferating method, inequalities and injustices are pursued at the legislative level through the frame of the consumer and individual rights. Activism, hence, is slimmed down; it becomes efficient and practical, a non-profit business offering full-time careers to duke it out with other businesses on the presumably equitable stage of the state and in the name of a public of consumers.

This phenomenon has become more pronounced over the last decade, as PIRG student chapters have diminished in influence—confined to more local and campus-specific issues--and professionally staffed state PIRG offices have become more prominent on the national radar.

### **The Non-Profit Enterprise and the Commodification of Social Activism**

The PIRGs stand out as a particularly concrete example of the way in which social change and activism was broadly reframed at the onset of the neoliberal project in the 1970s; activism—shaped by, as Levine and Wilson put it, a growing sense of individual ascendancy—was trimmed down to a legislative arm representing a multifarious public divided among a number of specific interests and issues. This public, however, is broadly cast as individual consumers whose interests and choice must be protected; the projects most often taken up are decidedly fiscally-oriented; and though the popular methods to enact change alter slightly through the decades, they remain strikingly corporatist, business-savvy, and consumer-concerned. The activist shift, then, most clearly represented by PIRG in the 1970s, reflects the ways that the rampant deregulation, privatization, and business-ethic of the 70s and consequent decades actively reshaped the way the public is conceptualized in relation to the state and economy.

No more clearly is this reconceptualization apparent than in the juxtaposition of U.S. PIRG's tagline, in which the organization proclaims itself an "independent voice for consumers", and PIRG's mission statement, proudly advertised on their website:

U.S. PIRG, the federation of state Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs), stands up to powerful special interests on behalf of the American public, working to win concrete results for our health and well-being. With a strong network of researchers, advocates, organizers, and students in state capitols across the country, we take on the special interests on issues such as product safety, public health, political corruption, tax and budget reform and consumer protection, where these interests stand in the way of reform and progress (U.S. PIRG).

Thus, the PIRGs tout themselves as a combative interest group for the *consumer*, standing up to other powerful interest groups on behalf of the American *public*. There is conflation between the "public" and the "consumer" that is critical in understanding and analyzing the terms of activism since the 1970s and the ways in which the more successful methods of social change operate, often gaining critical political and economic influence through wielding the identity of the consumer and employing consumerist techniques to advance causes. The public, then, is conceptualized as consumers and engaged with as consumers.

### **PIRG Campaigns**

This conflation is obvious in the rhetoric of most of PIRG's current leading

campaigns. “Standing up for the public on health care” means advocating for a “pro-consumer health care exchange” in which the economic units of the “family and business join together and negotiate for cheaper health care plans” (U.S. PIRG). “Putting public health ahead of big ag” translates to cutting federal corn subsidies to large agribusinesses as they affect the quality of food choices for consumers (U.S. PIRG). Though the rhetoric of the public and the consumer is more subtle in the campaign against corn subsidies, the campaign is couched in concerns for public health as it pertains to obesity and diabetes; the obesity epidemic is strategically connected to the proliferation of cheap “junk foods” made possible in part by corn subsidies to large agribusinesses like Cargill and Monsanto. Thus, the argument to end federal corn subsidies gains most of its strength from the demand to “stop subsidizing obesity” and protect public health by improving the quality of food choices for consumers (U.S. PIRG).

Other major campaigns include “reclaiming our democracy” through curbing the influence of large corporations in government. A main component of this campaign is lobbying with shareholders in large corporations, like Target or Bank of America, that are making or will potentially make large political contributions. This effort includes support of the Shareholder Protection Act, “a bill that would require corporations to seek the explicit approval of shareholders before spending a dime in electoral politics” (U.S. PIRG). Thus, this approach influences corporations through holding them accountable to their shareholders, or, as economist Joseph Farrell calls them, “owner-consumers” (1). Another facet of this campaign is a concerted attempt to rival corporate interest monies in politics through increasing public interest monies by encouraging greater numbers of contributions from individual citizens. Again, these campaigns advance their fights for

the “public” through framing that fight in terms of the consumer and drowning out corporate interest groups by beating them at their own game.

The way the PIRGs present themselves publicly, as well, lends to the idea of consumerism, with bracing taglines like “U.S. PIRG: Standing up to Powerful Interests” emblazoned on the homepage of the website (U.S. PIRG). Involvement with PIRG is streamlined, quick, and convenient, as advertised on their donations page where “supporting U.S. PIRG is quick and easy” as the donor can enter the amount and credit card information in the blanks below (U.S. PIRG). To “Take Action” on an issue, after having read an impassioned synopsis of its terms, the individual need only sign their name and contact information to a pre-fabricated card to the appropriate legislator. For example, an individual reads the synopsis of the potential increase in student loan interest rates this Summer:

In July, interest rates will DOUBLE on subsidized Stafford student loans that almost 8 million students use to pay for school. This will cause some borrowers to pay almost \$5000 more on their loan over a 10-year repayment (U.S. PIRG).

That individual can then channel any indignation by attaching her name and contact information to the following message:

Dear [Decision Maker],

Please support a plan to stop student loan interest rates from doubling this July.

Almost 8 million students use subsidized Stafford loans to pay for school and make it to graduation. Without a new plan, the students who borrow the maximum amount of subsidized Stafford loans could pay almost \$5000 more through the repayment of their loan. Students cannot shoulder such a huge increase in this economy.

Please support the plan to stop student loan interest rates from doubling this July!

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

[Your Address]

[City, State ZIP]

These methods, obviously, are not altogether bad, but it is critical to remark upon the ways in which large social justice organizations represent themselves and engage the public they purport to represent. For PIRG, public involvement entails legislative lobbying by individuals and donations to the organization to fund state PIRG offices. The greatest involvement in the campaigns and politics of the organization comes from the paid staff at various state PIRG offices across the country as well as in the capitol, Washington, D.C. The staff positions range from being a state campaign director, whose tasks include “creat[ing] and implement[ing] winning campaign strategies” in line with the principles of the organization, ultimately operating as the face for the state PIRG chapter, to being a campus organizer, rallying student volunteers around local causes, also corresponding to the organization’s vested interests (U.S. PIRG). Broad public

engagement, then, is trimmed down and streamlined while the majority of political involvement rests upon a hired staff.

Thus, not only does the conflation between the “public” and the “consumer” affect the way in which issues pursued by the organization are termed, but the seemingly interchangeable nature of the “public” and the “consumer” changes how civil society and the individual are perceived, influencing the way in which activist organizations fundamentally operate. Social justice becomes a full-time career and involvement from the general public is streamlined, made convenient; in understanding the public as the consumer, social and political engagement and activism is, in a way, advertised and sold. Nowhere is this phenomenon more apparent than in PIRGs’ affiliation with The Fund for the Public Interest, their external funding organization and the source of the majority of the organization’s “one-on-one interactions” with the general public.

### **The Fund for the Public Interest**

Much of the state PIRGs’ funding for causes like cutting federal corn subsidies as well as their grassroots “one-on-one” education is outsourced to the non-profit canvassing organization, the Fund for the Public Interest (the Fund). In fact, the PIRGs could be understood as one organization under the umbrella of the larger Fund for the Public interest network, which includes other special interest organizations like the Human Rights Campaign, Environmental Action, and Environment America. Though each organization is autonomous, they form a coalition sharing the canvassing resources that the Fund provides. Often, full-time state PIRG staff works in the same office as the



Fund canvassing directors and canvassers, as is the case at the Columbus office in Ohio.

The Fund's purpose, expounded on their website, optimistically highlights their mission as a fund-raising and advocacy group for non-profits:

The Fund helps organizations win today and build for tomorrow. And we do this the old-fashioned way: through one-on-one interactions (The Fund for the Public Interest).

More specifically, through canvassing efforts, the Fund aims to "increase the visibility, membership and political power of the nation's leading environmental and progressive groups" (The Fund for the Public Interest). This goal mainly equates to fundraising as well as petitioning.

The Fund has several offices in numerous states and cities across the country. The offices are usually managed by a single canvassing director and one or more assistant canvassing directors whose main objective is to grow the office, or hire and retain an optimal number of canvassers underneath them. The directors and the canvassers (if they remain on staff) work for a number of organizations' campaigns that change over the months, stressing the need to hire staff with deft sales skills more than interest or passion in the cause. Indeed, canvassers for the Fund are held to a daily quota of over \$120 and are given a three-day span of time to hit that quota; individual canvasser commission is made on all money raised in addition to the quota. It is this emphasis on fundraising standards in the Fund that troubles the notion of canvassing as the PIRGs' main vein of direct public engagement and one-on-one interaction.

Because the employee retention revolves around fundraising numbers, canvassers for PIRG (as well as all Fund-associated organizations) are most often sent to middle or upper middle class neighborhoods to knock on doors. Information about the campaign is relayed through “raps” whose chief purpose is to incite the donor to contribute and/or become a member (for a small fee). Thus, one-on-one education, one of the primary tools for advocacy and visibility for the organization, generally devolves into a sales pitch, catering to simplicity and emotion and aimed at a subset of the population more capable and inclined to consume.

### **The Human Rights Campaign**

This trend of couching issues in terms of the consumer and employing consumerist methods to advance those issues, essentially commodifying social activism, is evident in a multitude of special interests lobbyist groups spawned in the 70s or shortly thereafter. The Human Rights Campaign, another organization associated with the Fund, has become the popular face for the twenty-first century’s gay equality politics. This is a politics, as Lisa Duggan points out, fundamentally based in gaining wider mainstream acceptance for gays and lesbians rather than making any broad-based or poignant critiques of a system that has actively excluded them; it seeks change through conceptualizing homosexuals as viable *consumers* within the neoliberal market landscape. As Duggan argues in regards to a similar gay rights organization, the Independent Gay Forum (IGF):

The new neoliberal sexual politics of IGF might be termed the new

homonormativity--it is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption (Duggan 50).

Thus, the issues advanced by the Human Rights Campaign center on gay marriage or “marriage equality” and the ability for homosexuals to serve openly in the military.

The methods enacted by HRC are decidedly corporatist. The organization has a legion of corporate sponsors supporting their issues, including Macy’s, American Airlines, and Coca-Cola. Activism and social justice, then, defined by HRC, can be used to endorse products; it becomes a brand companies can employ to entice individuals to consume. The public can then show support for “marriage equality” through donating directly to HRC or shopping at one of their many corporate sponsors. Social justice and activism, defined narrowly in terms of the consumer, becomes something you can wear, something that you are sold.

The challenge of gaining funds for non-profit lobbyist groups like the PIRGs and HRC not only contributes to the consumerist nature of their activism but also leads inadvertently to labor exploitation. Contrary to the messages of economic and social justice touted by organizations like the PIRGs and HRC, their fundraising raising arm, the Fund for the Public Interest, has been riddled for several years by labor issues; indeed, the Fund has become notorious for various labor abuses. In an effort to cut the costs of operation for the organization, employees are often expected to work long hours and personally shoulder some of the expenses incurred by the organization.

This commonplace practice for the Fund is evidenced in a multitude of reviews written by former employees on *glassdoor.com*, a website designed to increase transparency of various companies' labor practices for potential employees. As one Citizen Outreach director, warns: "the hours are 60-80 a week, and the pay is as low as the state allows" (Glassdoor). Another former director laments the 60-80 hour work-week at a salary of \$24,000 as well as the Fund's expectation to "pay out of pocket for things like gas, travel, and other work-related expenses" (Glassdoor). Indeed, all twenty-eight reviews written by former employees for the Fund continue in a strikingly similar vein.

Complaints such as these have incited some employees of the Fund to unionize, demanding more realistic fundraising standards and better job security as well as reasonable payment for hours worked. Unionizing attempts, however, have been met with austerity measures and refusals to negotiate on behalf of Fund management. In 2005, Los Angeles Fund employees who voted to unionize were fired, the upper management refused to negotiate terms and put a freeze on new hiring in the high turn-over workplace. After the union vote, the Los Angeles office was eventually closed altogether (Mirk). More recently, in 2011 employees at a Fund call center in Portland, Oregon voted 19-5 to form a union with another canvassing organization. Two of the three workers appointed to negotiate bargaining terms were then systematically fired after which the fledgling union staged a walkout from the office. The action drew over 100 supporters who protested outside of the Fund office, flouting signs imploring the Oregon PIRG's chapter as well as the state's Environment America chapter to "tell the Fund to practice what you preach" (Mirk).

The *modus operandi*, then, for some of the more successful and established social

justice organizations, like the PIRGs and the Human Rights Campaign, seems to be couching social change in the interest of a consumerist public, pursuing their causes singularly through the state, and engaging the public through strikingly consumerist means; funding legislative battles often necessitates the outsourcing of tasks to specialized fundraising and visibility organizations, like the Fund for the Public Interest, in which commissioned canvassers are briefed on a specific issue and rewarded generally based upon financial standards (how much money raised). Canvassers and directors employed by the Fund and, by association, PIRG and HRC, are largely treated as a labor commodity, disposable and secondary to monetary objectives.

All this has the effect of commodifying social activism and narrowing the field of social justice to making legislative changes on behalf of a constituency of consumers. Activist organizations become businesses where labor is used to advance causes and reach out to a subset of the public most able to consume. Thus, though the PIRGs seat their fight in economic justice and beating back corporate interests, their consumerist methods and rhetoric--shaped by a political, social, economic background of neoliberal corporatism--serve mainly to reinscribe the economic and social hierarchies advanced by the neoliberal capitalist project.

### **Conclusion: Barriers to Radical Social Change**

Lobbyist and litigation organizations like the PIRGs are representative of what activism and civic engagement has largely looked like in Bauman's "second modernity" (3). The radical liberation of market forces under the institution of neoliberal theory in the 1970s has required the liquefaction of collectivities through valorizing the concepts of

privatization and personal responsibility (having disproportionate affects on the population along lines of class, race, gender, and sexuality). This tactic has given way to a rise in individual ascendancy, stressing the primacy of the individual over the community and conceptualizing individual freedom in terms of the consumer. This emergence of what Margaret Thatcher described as “a society of individuals” has had a profound impact on mainstream methods of social change as the interests of civil society have been divided among a multitude of special interest groups, concerned with improving conditions for specific groups of people (quoted in Harvey 23); singular issues are then taken up through the state on behalf of constituencies often understood in terms of the consumer.

Large lobbyist efforts, then, are advanced through couching the public interest in terms of consumer interests and engaging with the public on those terms. Organizations like the PIRGs and HRC become decidedly business-like as civic engagement is streamlined into petitions and donations and campaigns are funded at the expense of fair labor practices. This approach to social change has the effect of commodifying social activism, rendering civic engagement as something to be advertised and consumed. Activism in this way works well within the neoliberal agenda, in which individual freedom usually devolves to advocacy for greater consumer choice in an expanding market underpinned by hierarchies of class, race, gender, and sexuality. Specifically, lobbyist activism in the vein of the PIRGs and HRC affects public political engagement in three interrelated ways that stunt its potential for inciting radical social change in the current system.

First, as an upward redistribution of resources seems to be the most persistent

characteristic of neoliberalism, massive economic inequalities are then inevitable. As David Harvey puts it:

there is abundant evidence that neoliberal theory and rhetoric (particularly the political rhetoric concerning liberty and freedom) has also all along primarily functioned as a mask for practices that are all about the maintenance, reconstitution, and restoration of elite class power (Harvey 188).

Thus, engaging the public as consumers and representing them as such has the effect of relegating social activism to a subset of the population most able and inclined to consume, namely the middle and upper classes. Understanding activism in terms of consumerism has the effect of reinscribing the social and economic hierarchies endemic to the capitalist order.

Second, the splintered nature of activism through the development of special interest lobbyist groups like the PIRGs and HRC obscures the ways in which social and economic inequalities are fundamentally interrelated. Indeed, Lisa Duggan argues that the most common and critical fault for contemporary social movements and social justice organizations is an inability to see the connections and interrelations among the political, the economic, and the cultural; the front for contemporary leftist politics, then, appears fractured along a divide between economic/class politics and identity/cultural politics. Representing very specific interests and pursuing singular issues—like the PIRGs with economic justice or the Human Rights Campaign with gay rights—hinders understanding of how identity issues are inextricably tied to issues of class and economics.

For example, the reduction of federal social safety nets and collective bargaining groups advanced through the concepts of privatization and personal responsibility have had an uneven affect on civil society, especially along the lines of race, sexuality, and gender. As Lisa Duggan puts it:

social service functions are privatized through personal responsibility as the proper functions of the state are narrowed, tax and wage costs in the economy are cut, and more social costs are absorbed by civil society and the family. In addition, this redistribution of costs and benefits has been starkly differentiated by hierarchies of race, gender, and sexuality (Duggan 17).

This phenomenon is evident in the welfare reforms of the 1990s, as they disproportionately affected poor women and children through advancing policies with a vested interest in the heterosexual, patriarchal family structure and sexual propriety. These policies included “‘family caps’ to limit support for newborns, mandatory child support cooperation even in cases of domestic violence, family planning and adoption relinquishment incentives, and sexual abstinence education” (Duggan 16). Thus, the neoliberal economic project of market liberalization through valorizing concepts of privatization and personal responsibility is cut through with issues of identity, as Duggan succinctly describes:

In neoliberal discourse, married women are assumed to be responsible for children and dependent on wage-earning husbands, and are often advised to stay



at home during their children's early years to build self-esteem and independence in the young. They are also encouraged to volunteer, as the bulwarks of civil society and "faith-based" social service provisions, with their unpaid labor underpinning the *privatized* social safety net. Single, divorced, and widowed women may "choose" to work in a gender and race-segmented labor market without affordable childcare or public assistance in order to build their self-esteem and independence—or, some welfare reformers suggest, they may "choose" to put their children up for adoption by married couples, or house them in orphanages (Duggan 17).

Effective social activism, then, must be able to engage with economic inequalities as they are related to issues of identity; special interest lobbyist groups invested in consumerist rhetoric and methods serve to divide activism into singular, discrete issues to be tackled through the state one at a time, disabling the ability to analyze how inequalities are affiliated.

Third, through pursuing issues entirely through the legislative system of the state and consequently engaging the public largely with the intent of fundraising and petitioning, the scope of civic, democratic engagement and analysis is narrowed. Individuals can count themselves as politically and socially involved through donating to the PIRGs or petitioning a legislator while the organization's staff brings issues to the attention of federal law-makers. Streamlining political and social involvement in this way and appealing, ultimately, to state power and authority to incite change cripples the possibility for more broad-based social and political engagement and multi-faceted

analytical approaches to social change.

According to David Harvey, the objectives of creating greater social equality and eradicating social ills like “poverty, illiteracy, or disease’ . . . cannot be realized without challenging the fundamental power bases upon which neoliberalism has been built and to which the processes of neoliberalization have so lavishly contributed” (Harvey 187). This includes recognizing the ways in which the neoliberal agenda of increasing capital accumulation is advanced through class and identity politics and has a way of reconceptualizing freedom in terms individualism and consumerism. Radical social change, then, requires an inclusive approach that engages people at all levels of the economic spectrum and works through multiple venues of activism. As Lisa Duggan describes it:

Only an interconnected, analytically diverse, cross-fertilizing and expansive left can seize this moment to lead us elsewhere, to newly imagined possibilities for equality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Duggan xxii).

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