

## Chapter 43

# The Re-habitualisation of Boycotts: From Disruption to Everyday Life

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### Abstract

Boycotts are commonly framed as momentary acts of resistance, either as tactical disruptions within social movement or as moral expressions in the consumption field. Although widely researched, existing work tends to focus on the mobilisation and impact of boycotts, while overlooking the process that follows. This chapter proposes a new orientation to understand the *re-habitualisation* of boycott, a process through which protest-driven changes in consumption patterns are reconfigured over time. Rather than mere habituation, *re-habitualisation* highlights that daily life is never politically neutral, but a dynamic terrain where political meanings may persist, transform, or dissolve.

To conceptualise this dynamic, I draw on practice theory, which views social life as constituted through routinised practices, making it well-suited to explore post-disruption trajectories. Boycotts are framed as practice performances that interrupt and reconfigure established routines. Methodologically, the analysis is theoretically grounded, with the Fair-Trade movement serving as an illustrative case. This analysis looks into the longer-term trajectories of boycott, while bridging the fields of social movement studies, consumption research, and theories of everyday life.

**Keywords:** *Boycotts, Social Movements, Political Consumerism, Practice Theory, Everyday Life*

### Introduction

The term boycott emerged during the Irish Land War of the 1870s, when tenants refused to deal with Charles Cunningham Boycott, and has since become a widely used tactic from the anti-apartheid struggle to contemporary consumer. Historically, boycotts have long operated both as collective strategies of contention and as everyday acts of political consumption refusal in the marketplace. However, existing research has focused on their mobilisation and symbolic force, while overlooking what happens after the initial disruption.

To address this gap, this article introduces the concept of *re-habitualisation*, the process through which refusals may persist, reconfigure, or fade into new consumption routines. Drawing on practice theory, I argue that boycotts should not be understood merely as intervention tactics, but as practices that could reshape the organisation of everyday life. While primarily theoretical, this chapter also draws on the case of Fair Trade to illustrate how consumer refusals can crystallise into enduring forms of ethical consumerism.

## Results and Discussion

### Existing Research on Social Movements and Consumption

Social movement scholarship has evolved in its understanding of boycotts over several decades. Early studies positioned boycotts within the *repertoire of contention*<sup>1</sup>, emphasising their strategic and disruptive functions. As the field developed, New Social Movement theorists shifted focus toward identity and culture, leading scholars to reframe boycotts as lifestyle politics<sup>2</sup>. While this cultural turn offered valuable insights, it still risks treating boycotts primarily as post-materialist expressions, while overlooking how they may persist after the peak mobilisation periods.

This invites us to look beyond the mobilisation point, to examine the longer-term trajectories. While recent scholarship highlights diffuse, long-term consequences of social movements exist<sup>3</sup>. This perspective has overlooked how this process may gradually become embedded into ordinary life. Consumer boycotts present a compelling case because they operate directly through everyday consumption practices, making visible how political engagement may (or may not) sustain in the long run.

Boycotts, as a form of political consumption, may begin as deliberate acts but can become repetitive and habitual over time. This dual nature positions them between two models of consumption, deliberative choice, emphasising symbolic display and identity, and habitual practice, rooted in routine and systems of provision. From a processual perspective, this dual nature suggests how boycotts could carry political engagement beyond moments of deliberate choice, becoming embedded in everyday practice.

Micheletti<sup>4</sup> offered the conceptualisation of political consumerism, framing it as 'individualised collective action'. Crucially, she emphasises that such practices blur the boundaries between private and public spheres, transforming personal market choices into forms of political participation. Once consumption is understood as political participation, its significance rests on attaching ethical meaning to market choices, a move underpinned by the broader ideology of ethical consumerism, which naturalises the idea that individual market actions are both politically and morally charged<sup>5</sup>. This evolution shows how political meanings could be stabilised within consumption practices. However, what remains less understood is how such practices evolve in the long run, a gap this article aims to address.

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (McGraw-Hill, 1978).

<sup>2</sup>Melucci, Alberto, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup>Lorenzo Bosi et al., eds., *The Consequences of Social Movements* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup>M. Micheletti, *Political Virtue and Shopping: Individuals, Consumerism, and Collective Action*, 1st ed (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

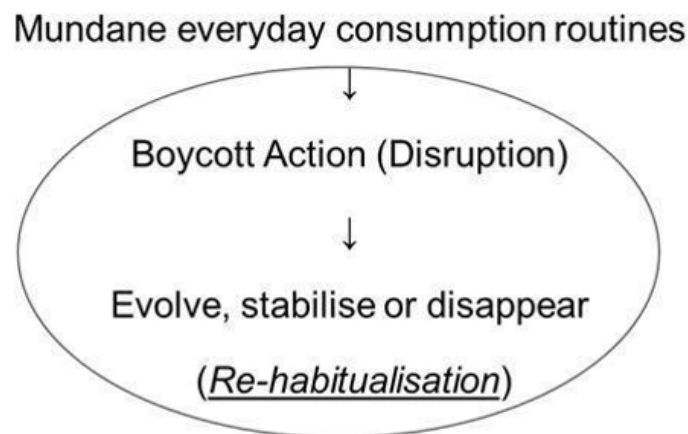
<sup>5</sup>Clive Barnett et al., 'Consuming Ethics: Articulating the Subjects and Spaces of Ethical Consumption', *Antipode* 37, no. 1 (2005): 23–45, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0066-4812.2005.00472.x>.

## The Politicalisation of Everyday Life: What Happens Beyond ‘Disruption’

As mentioned above, scholars from both fields have offered valuable insights into boycotts, situating them either as part of contentious politics or as a form of political consumerism in the marketplace. Together, these approaches have explored the symbolic meaning of boycotts, how they mobilise everyday consumption into political struggle, and the outcomes they may generate. However, less attention has been paid to the processes afterwards, on how such refusals unfold in everyday life.

This gap invites attention to everyday life, which has increasingly been recognised as central to political expression and social change<sup>6</sup>. Classic theorists have highlighted how mundane practices are simultaneously structured by dominant systems and reworked through resistance and negotiation<sup>7</sup>. In this sense, what appears ordinary could operate as a powerful orientation for social change.

In particular, boycotting offers a critical site to examine this dynamic. It disrupts existing, habituated consumption patterns, which forces reconsideration of established routines. To capture what happens after such disruptions, this article proposes the concept of *re-habitualisation*: the process through which political refusals are negotiated in the long run, either routinised, transformed into new practices, or fade away. Rather than passive habituation, it draws attention to the continual adjustments of ‘politics’, shifting the focus to the longer-term trajectories (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** The re-habitualisation process.

Given space constraints, this article does not seek to fully conceptualise re-habitualisation but identifies it as a theoretical gap for future work. As a starting point, practice theory could provide a framework for explaining how refusals may stabilise over time.

### Practice Theory: A Framework for Analysis

Practice theory shifts attention from individuals or structures to *social practices*, understood as routinised behaviours, as the basic unit of social analysis<sup>8</sup>. Warde<sup>9</sup> identifies three key elements of

<sup>6</sup>Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>7</sup>de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

<sup>8</sup>Andreas Reckwitz, ‘Toward a Theory of Social Practices: A Development in Culturalist Theorizing’, *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 2 (2002): 243–63, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310222225432>.

<sup>9</sup>Alan Warde, ‘Consumption and Theories of Practice’, *Journal of Consumer Culture* 5, no. 2 (2005): 131–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540505053090>.

practice within the context of consumption: procedures, understandings, and engagement. Applied to the re-habitualisation of boycotts, this framework sees boycotts not simply as deliberate refusal, but as evolving practices shaped by gradual shifts in these elements. For example, the understanding of a boycott may shift from a form of collective protest to a personal ethical commitment; procedures such as using boycott apps or checking labels may become habitualised; and engagements may move from initial outrage to a more general sense of care or responsibility. Boycotts, therefore, do more than interrupt established consumption patterns, they should be regarded as practices through which needs and wants are reconfigured.

In discussing the stability and change in practices, Schatzki<sup>10</sup> further distinguishes between *practices-as-entities* and *practices-as-performances*. Practices-as-entities refer to the socially recognisable configurations that define a practice, while practices-as-performances refer to the actual enactments of these practices in everyday life. This conceptualisation enables us to explore how practices evolve and change over time. As performances accumulate and adapt, they may gradually reconfigure the overall entity. In the context of boycott afterlife, this distinction allows us to conceptualise the aftermath not simply as a disappearance or continuation but as a dynamic process of interaction between specific practices (e.g., political consumption) and broader entities (e.g., ethical consumerism), which continually pushes forward the development of how we understand *ethics*.

To further ground this theoretical discussion, the following section draws on the case of Fair Trade to illustrate how boycotts could be re-habitualised into everyday consumption routines.

### **Illustrative Case: Fair Trade**

Although not a boycott itself, Fair Trade could be regarded as part of the afterlife of boycott: it arose in response to campaigns such as the Nike Sweatshop Boycott, offering consumers an ethical alternative. Emerging from faith-based and solidarity trade initiatives in the 1950s-1960s, it later developed into a certification system that made ethical choices more accessible<sup>11</sup>. Over time, practices such as label checking became embedded in everyday shopping, illustrating how boycott-inspired refusals can stabilise into routinised consumption, an example of re-habitualisation.

As an outcome, ethical consumerism should be understood not as a direct, self-aware moral choice, but as something that gradually re-articulates through repeated, routinised everyday practices<sup>12</sup>. Drawing on practice theory, particularly the distinction between practice-as-entity (the broader ideology of ethical consumerism) and practice-as-performance (individual ethical practices in daily life), we can see how repeated practices reshape what counts as 'ethical'. Over time, supported by campaigns, labels, and market narratives<sup>13</sup>, this recursive process embeds political meanings into daily life as taken-for-granted norms. Thus, the meaning of ethical consumerism is never fixed, but continually redefined through the

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<sup>10</sup>Theodore R. Schatzki, *Social Practices: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Human Activity and the Social* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup>Klein, Naomi. *No Logo*. HarperCollins UK, 2001.

<sup>12</sup>Barnett et al., 'Consuming Ethics'.

<sup>13</sup>Barnett et al., 'Consuming Ethics'.

interplay of everyday performances and the broader entity they constitute, a spiral, evolving process that illustrates how political practices stabilise in mundane routines.

## Limitations and Implications

The re-habitualisation perspective offers valuable insights for both policy and practice. Its focus on everyday routines is particularly relevant to community empowerment and sustainability, highlighting the infrastructures needed to stabilise ethical practices beyond peak protest moments. Rather than relying on episodic mobilisation, policymakers could support local initiatives that embed political meaning in daily consumption, extending the legacy of collective action. In this way, the perspective strengthens civic engagement and fosters more durable participation, grounding policy in ordinary life rather than exceptional events.

While this article introduces re-habitualisation, further conceptual and empirical work is needed to clarify its stages, phases, and outcomes. Attention should also be given to international solidarity, especially in today's post-COVID, de-globalising world, where nationalist boycotts may follow divergent trajectories shaped by contrasting political logics.

## Conclusion

This article proposes *re-habitualisation* to explain how boycotts unfold after the moment of disruption. While existing research emphasises the symbolic character of boycotts, I argue that boycotts should be understood as social practices that may stabilise and transform our everyday life. Drawing on practice theory and illustrated through Fair Trade, this perspective highlights how political refusals are continually negotiated, embedding political meaning in mundane routines. By focusing on the politics of the ordinary, re-habitualisation bridges social movement and consumption research, while suggesting directions for future research on further developing the phases and mechanisms of the process.

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