WORKING PAPER:

'We Won't Pay': Price rises and socialist-feminist consumer activism in the 1970s[i]

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As Mica Nava (1987, 1992) and Lydia Martens (2009) have noted, there is a 'conventional' assumption that feminism has a hostile relationship with consumer culture, an assumption which has limited opportunities to explore the potential of consumer culture and consumption practices as a site for feminist politics. Indeed, even in the early days of the women's movement, Ellen Willis (1971: 658) was critical of how, under the influence of Herbert Marcuse (1964), a 'conventional' position had quickly become established. She observed how many feminists assumed that an all-powerful capitalist consumer culture 'psychically manipulated' women into buying goods to increase profits, positioning them as 'passive consumers' whose consumption practices reproduced their own oppression as sexual objects and housewives. Furthermore, as Martens (2009: 34) argues, a 'persistent vision' of a 'historical antagonism between feminism and consumer culture' also impacts on contemporary feminist arguments about consumer culture. One result of this antagonism is the 'lack of connection' and 'non-communication' between feminist scholarship and the field of consumption studies (Littler 2009:176; Casey and Martens 2007: 2).[ii]

This article is part of a wider project which aims to create a dialogue between feminism and consumption. One way to move this relationship forward is by tracking backwards into feminism's recent past. While a selective tradition has resulted in the 'conventional' position identified by Martens and Nava, an exploration of documents from the women's movement of the 1970s reveals a far more diverse range of feminist perspectives on both consumer culture and

consumption practices, alongside evidence of a wide range of consumer activism to combat women's oppression. These included attempts to use the market to develop a 'women's culture'; forms of consumer activism such as boycotts and sit-ins; and proposals for 'consuming differently' and/or 'less' (Binkley and Littler 2008: 545).[iii] Constructing this history can help to develop a gendered dimension to debates about consumption, lifestyle and the counterculture in the late 1960s and the 1970s (Belasco 2007; Binkley 2007; Frank 1997). Furthermore, it creates the potential to intervene in on-going debates about political consumption: as Jo Littler (2009: 175) argues, 'it makes sense to analyze the ways in which "political consumption" and gender have been, could be – and *are being* – connected, or re-articulated; and to open the debate about gender and consumer culture out further, and wider, than before'.

This article focuses on the ways in which socialist feminists in the US and UK used forms of consumer activism to respond to the impact of rising prices on women. While these feminists were frequently highly critical of consumer culture, they saw consumption practices as a means of challenging the ways in which consumer culture operated rather than seeing these practices as a passive reflection of its needs. In this way, they echoed Willis's attempt to disentangle feminism's critique of consumer culture from a critique of the practices of consumers, challenging the idea that 'consumption under capitalism is mere capitalist consumption' (Miller 2001: 234). Furthermore, socialist-feminist consumer activism also echoed Willis's (1971: 659)

argument that ‘The profit system is oppressive not because relatively trivial luxuries are available, but because basic necessities are not’ (1971: 659). As I go on to show, this led some feminists to focus on the political implications for women of the ‘day-to-day practices of getting and spending’ (Hilton 2003: 2). By connecting with mundane consumption practices, I go on to suggest that feminist political consumption made connections with– and reflexively responded to – what Clive Barnett et al (2005: 28) call the ‘ordinarily ethical’ dimensions of everyday consumption practices.

By focusing on a second-wave feminist politics of ‘getting and spending’, it becomes possible to see continuities with consumer protests and struggles associated with first-wave feminism and socialist women in the early twentieth century. As a result, the article starts with an overview of some of the key themes to emerge from research on this period. I then move on to focus on consumer activism in response to escalating inflation during the early-mid 1970s in the US and UK. Primarily drawing on periodicals and newsletters from the women’s movement located in the Herstory Microfilm Collection, I identify how US feminists understood inflation as a significant issue for women. While I would not suggest that feminists played a central role in the mass consumer protests against food prices in the US, their contributions add complexity to portrayals of these protests as primarily organized around the figure of ‘the housewife’ (Friedman 1995; LaBarbera Twarog 2011). I then move on to provide a more in-depth case study of socialist-feminism activism in response to price rises in the UK, focusing on the Lincoln Estate Food

Coop organized by women in the libertarian Marxist group East London Big Flame. Drawing on documents produced by the group and an interview with ex-members, I examine how the group politicized consumption by conceptualizing it as part of – but not identical to – domestic labour. I demonstrate how the Coop created a space to 'open up a range of everyday practices to strategic "ethical" conduct' (Barnett et al 2011:37). In the process, I not only aim to document a missing strand in histories of consumer activism, but also to contribute to a reconceptualization of the relationships between the politics of feminism and consumption.

Feminism, Socialism and Women's Consumer Activism: historical perspectives

While it is 'conventionally' understood that second-wave feminism has been hostile to consumer culture and unwilling to use consumption practices as a form of politics, historical research demonstrates that this has not been the only feminist position on consumption and that first-wave feminists were far more willing to engage in forms of consumer activism. Not only did suffragists use consumer culture as a central site for promoting their message (Finnegan 1999) but some first-wave feminists were willing to employ consumption practices as a means of fighting against women's exploitation. This activism was often organized around women's role as wives, mothers and consumers, identifications rejected by many second-wave feminists. Nonetheless, some first-wave and second-wave feminists shared an interest in finding new ways to organize domestic consumption. This can be seen in a preoccupation with

politicizing everyday life by exploring ways of 'reshaping and redefining… both private and social consumption' (Rowbotham 2010: 148): for example, proposals for forms of collective and cooperative living based on shared housework and childcare and attempts to 'socialize' aspects of domestic life such as cooking and laundry. Furthermore, as I go onto explore in this section, there are some continuities between the forms of consumer activism centred around the politics of the 'living wage' used by feminists and socialist women in the early parts of the twentieth century and the strategies used by socialist feminists in the 1970s.

Political struggles around the living wage were used by both feminists and socialist women during the early twentieth century in both the US and UK. For example, Margaretta Hicks' work for the British Socialist Party articulated women's domestic consumption practices with the wider workers' struggle by highlighting the connection between the value of the wage and the price and quality of goods (Hunt 2000). In *The Revolt of the Consumer*, Teresa Billington Greig (1912), a key figure in the British suffrage movement, pushed this further by imagining 'the possibility of a socialism that was intrinsically women-focused' because it put women's roles as consumers on an equal footing with men's role as producers in the socialist struggle (Hamman and Hunt 2002: 160-1). Billngton-Greig argued that capitalism had worked to divide the 'natural' partnership between the consumer and the producer both by presenting them as figures with opposing interests and by encouraging them to exploit each other. As a result, workers not only failed to recognize

that they were also consumers but trade unions contributed to the valorization of paid work as the only meaningful form of activity. For Billington-Greig (1912: 56-60), revaluing the significance of consumption was not only a necessary intervention in socialist struggles over the 'living wage', but it was also a key way of revaluing women's labour and its importance in preserving human life and relationships, areas of life she saw as more significant than paid labour. Despite an essentialism that saw women as more 'naturally' predisposed to the work of consumption because of their roles as mothers, she saw consumer struggles as playing a key role in the fight for women's freedom. In this way, Billington-Greig not only articulated the politics of class and gender but she provides evidence of a different relationship between feminism and consumption than the 'conventional' position.

The politicization of women's role as consumers in relation to a 'living wage' was evident in early twentieth century British struggles over the cost of food and rent that also articulated the politics of class and gender. Women's involvement in protests against rent prices in Leeds and Glasgow in the 1910s were not simply a class-based struggle to secure 'fair rents' but also a gendered response to women's responsibility for paying the rent out of a limited household budget (Hamman and Hunt 2002; Rowbotham 2010). Consumer activism also became a way of connecting working-class women with feminist politics: while the Women's Cooperative Guild under Margaret Llewelyn Davis orchestrated women's power as consumers, it also acted as

site for ‘the organizational expression of a wide-ranging feminist agenda’ (Scott cited in Hilton 2003: 42). Sylvia Pankhurst’s ‘No Vote No Rent’ campaign employed the ‘rent strike as an important political weapon for women’, politicizing their role as consumers in the fight for suffrage (Hamman and Hunt 2002: 152). However, Pankhurst’s role in this rent strike and wider protests about food prices also connected women’s activism as consumers to a feminism which saw community politics as a way of fighting for working-class women (Rowbotham 1973). During World War I, Pankhurst’s East London Federation of Suffragettes prefigured second-wave feminist modes of community politics with consumer-based campaigns over access to food running alongside the establishment of ‘community services’ such as a clinic and other ‘self-help projects’ (Rowbotham 2010: 163). The ability of consumer activism to act as the basis for wider forms of community struggle which could unite working-class women as a political force is also highlighted in Annelise Orleck’s (1993) study of consumer activism in the US during the Depression. While these protests were not organized around a feminist agenda, they enabled working-class women across ethnic and ‘racial’ divides to play a political role in shaping the public sphere. In some cases, these protests over rising prices enabled women to make wider demands over health and childcare provision in their neighbourhoods (Orleck 2993: 164). As I go on to demonstrate, this connection between consumer and community activism would be developed in socialist-feminist political struggles.

Finally, historical research on the politics of 'getting and spending' demonstrates how working-class women used consumption practices to highlight their struggles as domestic workers within the home. For example, in her study of women's participation in consumer organizing within the Seattle labour movement in the 1920s, Dana Frank (1994: 52) argues that women's 'interest in cooperation stemmed from their workplace concerns…. as housewives'. Cooperatives offered female consumers a way of combating the effects of rising inflation which had created 'more work in hunting bargains, meal planning and narrowed options within which to address family's demands' (Frank 1994: 53). Although the movement was not feminist-identified, these responses nonetheless show a complex understanding of the politics of consumption in relation to the sexual division of labour that would be echoed in socialist-feminist consumer organizing.

While I have highlighted aspects of earlier waves of women's consumer politics that prefigure later socialist-feminist activism, these earlier forms of protest and cooperation (alongwide their more 'conservative' counterparts) were frequently mobilized around the figure of the housewife. A number of critics have documented how, despite the fact that some second-wave feminists were housewives, the identity of the feminist was partially constructed through a rejection of domestic life and through a disidentification with 'the housewife' and 'the consumer', collective identities that had been central in earlier waves of consumer organizing (Brunsdon 2000; Giles 2004; Hollows 2006, 2007; Johnson and Lloyd 2004; Martens 2009). At the same

time, for second-wave feminists who were attempting to address themselves to the concerns of working-class women, this opposition between the feminist and the housewife was not always tenable. As I go on to show, socialist-feminist consumer activism frequently attempted to erase the distinction between the feminist and the housewife in creating the subject of consumer activism.

Price Inflation, Consumer Activism and the US Women's Movement in the early-mid 1970s

While a critique of consumer culture inspired by Marcuse and/or Friedan was a relatively common feature in many US second-wave feminist periodicals, this occurred alongside discussions of how consumption practices could be a site for activism and resistance. Based on an analysis of periodicals form the US women's movement in the early-mid 1970s, this section explores how a politics of 'getting and spending' was articulated with the concerns of feminism, particularly in relation to rising food prices. However, it is worth noting that food was a more widespread concern across a number of periodicals, frequently echoing key issues within the counterculture such as ecology, the environment, health and the impact of agri-business (Belasco 2007; Binkley 2007; Lemke-Santangelo 2009). While concerns about rising prices occurred across a range of publications, they were most common in what Alice Echols (1989) identifies as the 'politico' or left-identified strand of the movement which, in some cases, formed the basis for socialist-feminist

politics. Although some of these newspapers lie outside the ‘canon’ of feminist periodicals, they also enable a history of activism beyond ‘social formations already identified as feminist’ (Enke 2007:4) and therefore contribute to the possibility of telling a wider range of stories about feminism’s ‘recent past that [might] more accurately reflect the diversity of perspectives within (or outside) its orbit’ (Hemmings 2005: 130).

These representations need to be located in a wider context in which rising prices were a focal point for widespread consumer activism in the US during the period (Cohen 2004). These protests have often been seen as the final wave of housewives’ consumer organizing around prices (Friedman 1995): as Emily LaBarbera Twarog (2011: 173) argues, the meat boycotts of 1969 and 1973 marked ‘the end of the citizen housewife and domestic politics as an effective strategy in the fight for the living wage for American families’. However, it is interesting to note that some interpretations of housewives’ activism over food price rises used a language of empowerment derived from feminism: in May 1973, Lynn Jordan from Virginia Citizens Consumer Council claimed that the meat boycotts were a ‘consciousness-raising experience’ which let consumers ‘know they can move mountains’ (cited in Monroe 1995: 65). As I go on to explore, within the women’s movement, activism over rising prices becomes a way of both incorporating the concerns of ‘the housewife’ within feminist politics and extending the subject of female consumer activist beyond the identity ‘housewife’.

Few explicitly feminist interpretations of the causes of inflation emerged within periodicals from the US women's movement. The Nixon government was frequently blamed as were the profit motives of both the food industry and corporate capitalism more generally. Some 'politico' women's papers also highlighted the impact of the Vietnam War and US imperialism.[iv] However, a more gendered analysis appeared in California's *Asian Women's Center Newsletter* (*AWCN*) which argued, echoing Billington Greig, that the 'exploitation of consumers is at least equal to labor exploitation as a basic capitalist phenomenon' and that this particularly impacted on women who 'are encouraged to buy rather than produce' (Gail, 1973: 2, 4-5). If the women's movement press were unconvinced by industry attempts to blame workers for rising prices, they were equally unimpressed with the government's attempts to blame the female consumer. Chicago Women's Liberation Union's (CWLU) criticized representations of housewives as incapable of managing their budget and 'liberated women' as demanding steak because they wouldn't devote time to cooking (CWLU 1973a: 5). In *AWCN*, Lucie (1974: 13) argued that Nixon's suggestion that women become 'more thrifty' was not 'a solution – he's telling us not to eat'. In *Battle Acts*, Laurie Fierstein (1972: 2) complained about claims made by Earl Butz, the US Secretary for Agriculture, that prices 'were set by Mrs. Housewife who is willing to pay the price for good beef'. Los Angeles' *CFM Report* (Comision Feminil Mexicana 1973:2), which represented Mexican women, objected to the ways in which the food industry created an image of a 'spoiled' female consumer who, despite enjoying an affluent lifestyles, was not prepared to pay for her insatiable demand of

expensive cuts of meat. Likewise, in *Changing Woman*, Jerri Whalen (1973: 5) also railed against the way a representative of the food industry addressed a meeting of Oregon's Housewives Against Inflation as if they were 'empty-headed children whose heads are turned by pretty trinkets' and as women who could afford 'the luxury of eating meat' if they would 'give up bowling, skiing, having our hair done and various other luxuries'. Although these industry and government representations of the female consumer might be difficult to differentiate from Friedan's, these accounts from the women's movement demonstrate resistance against a consumer culture which seeks to control them alongside an attempt to redefine, rather than disidentify with, the figure of the female consumer. They also seek to divest the female consumer of her associations with 'affluence'.

Given these debates, it is perhaps unsurprising that there was support for activism against rising food prices in some sections of the women's movement. Despite *Ms*'s recommendation that women should 'complain' rather than abstain from consumption (Daniel 1973: 41), a range of publications supported the 1973 Meat Boycotts. For some National Organization for Women (NOW) groups, the boycotts offered women the opportunity to unite by using their position as consumers as a form of collective 'womanpower', reminding their readers that 'the power of the female consumer bears much weight' (Radice 1973: 3; James 1973:2). *Off Our Backs* and *Battle Acts* associated themselves with Women United for Action, an offshoot of the left Worker's World Party who participated in a series of the

boycotts under the wider umbrella of Operation Food Price Rollback, a campaign launched in 1972 in their newspaper *Women United* (Dejanikus 1972; Meyers 1973). Women United led a series of protests against the government, the food industry and food retailers about rising prices, agitated in local stores to get rotten food removed from the shelves and launched Project Equal Pricing to fight against the practice of marking up prices on the days welfare recipients cashed their cheques. In some sections of the women's movement, this 'politico' position would be seen as the grounds for a feminist engagement with the politics of class and 'race'.

However, boycotts and protests were not seen as the only way to combat inflation. Feminist periodicals also gave advice on consuming 'less' or 'differently' in response to rising food prices. *CFM Report* included meatless recipes (Comision Feminil Mexicana 1973) while, in *Distaff*, a collective of women who had established an 'anti-consumerism policy' to lower food costs, offered guidance on how to combat unnecessary consumption and resist attempts to exploit them as consumers (Pharr 1973). *Womankind* suggested that food coops offered a means of taking control over the cost and nutrition levels of food and advocated shared cooking as a means of avoiding expensive convenience foods (CWLU 1973b: 13)). While the *AWCN* worried that food coops were of limited use to poorer women if they didn't take food stamps (Linda and Irene 1973: 8), they also proposed 'buying clubs' as a form of 'collective strength… to resolve, attack or deal' with rising prices ('Jefferson Community Buyer's Club' 1974: 6). These 'alternative' forms of consumption

that were associated with the counterculture were therefore mobilized in ways that were sensitive to the politics of class.

Although Friedman (1995) identifies the 1970s' boycotts in response to price rises as housewives' protests, the mode of address used in the women's movement press demonstrates an attempt to imagine a politicized female consumer beyond the figure of the housewife. Some papers addressed a specific target readership: *Her-Self* imagined its readers as students worried about prices while *Woman Worker* and *Berkeley and Oakland Women's Union* addressed women as workers whose 'REAL WAGES – our buying power – IS LOWER RIGHT NOW THAN IT WAS 5 YEARS AGO!' ('What is Inflation?$?' 1970: 9; Sally 1974). However, a number of papers disarticulated the figure of 'the female consumer' from that of 'the housewife' (without excluding the latter) and therefore created the potential for the female consumer to be the subject of feminist activism. *Womankind* argued that the price and quality of food was an issue for all women whether a 'young mother', an 'older woman', a working woman or a 'poor woman on welfare' (CWLU 1973b: 12). Similarly, *Battle Acts* suggested that all women were united in their role as consumers: 'Whether you are a housewife, a working woman, a welfare mother, a student, you probably shop or help shop for your family's needs' (Fierstein 1972: 2). In their inaugural issues, *Women United* (1972: [3]) addressed their 'sisters' as 'housewives, working mothers, welfare recipients and students'. As a result, these publications demonstrated that

female consumer activism around prices did not need to be organized around the figure of the housewife.

However, in the publications consulted, there was less explicitly feminist analysis of the impact of inflation on women. Some publications used personal testimonies to provide evidence of how price rises caused problems for women. These told of maternal self-sacrifice in order to feed children and highlighted how poverty structured women's ability to be recognized as 'appropriate' mothers (Linda and Irene 1973; Harris 1972; Diaz 1972). This concern with the ways in which the effects of price rises intersected with the politics of class and 'race' was also evident in features which focused on how the poor – especially the African-American and Chicano poor – paid more because they were located in neighbourhoods served by supermarkets offering lower quality food at higher prices (Pressnall 1972: 4). Although there was surprisingly little analysis of how price rises intensified women's oppression as workers in the home, a socialist-feminist position emerged in relation to women's paid work around the politics of the 'living wage'. Some papers suggested that, because women workers were less likely to be unionized, they had seen an even bigger drop in the 'real' value of their wages (Sally 1974) and 'third world women' were particularly vulnerable because of their precarious position in the job market (Beal 1973: 6). Chicago's *Womankind* took this further and argued that, because the operation of the economy was geared to the exploitation of women (Allyne 1971), women were

paid less than men meaning that wage freezes and price rises were therefore 'discrimination against working women' (Sue 1972).

This analysis has aimed to demonstrate how, in publications from the US women's movement, prices rises were represented as an issue for most women and were of particular consequence for women on lower incomes because inflation represented an attack on their living standards. These publications imagined a subject for female consumer activism beyond 'the housewife' that, nonetheless, didn't exclude housewives. The attention given to the ways in which women as consumers were paying higher prices as a result of profit-seeking manufacturing and retail corporations highlighted women's relationship to capital. As Batya Weinbaum and Amy Bridges (1979: 193) wrote in their socialist-feminist analysis of consumption (first published in 1976), 'In the labor market men confront capital in the form of their employers; in the market for goods and services women confront capital in the form of commodities.' Furthermore, socialist-feminist analysis imagined a space in which women were thought of as both workers *and* consumers, challenging the gendered basis of the politics of the 'real wage'.

Socialist Feminism and the Politics of Consumption in the UK: the Lincoln Estate Food Coop

While there was no British equivalent to the widespread consumer activism around food prices in the US during the early-mid 1970s, there were nonetheless localized, small-scale forms of consumer activism in response to

inflation in the UK.[v] Evidence from periodicals and commentary also suggests that price rises were a concern for British feminists during the period (Hingston 1973; Power of Women Collective 1974; Pollock 1974; Edmond and Fleming 1975; Malos 1980). In this section, however, I draw on material from archives and interviews to provide a detailed case-study of the Lincoln Estate Food Coop (LEFC) as one example of socialist-feminist activism that used consumption practices to combat the effects of rising prices on working-class women.[vi] Focusing on a single case enables me to identify how this activism formed the basis for a socialist-feminist politics of consumption that connected women's position within the home to ideas about community struggle, a politics which offered an alternative to the 'conventional' feminist position on consumption.

Despite little socialist-feminist activism around rising prices in the UK, the LEFC did not emerge in a vacuum. While some socialist feminists were involved in tenants' struggles in response to the rent rises proposed by the Housing Finance Act of 1972, there was other activism in response to rising food prices. In particular, the women behind the LEFC were in contact with Nottingham Women's Liberation who led a prices campaign which tied into a longer history of struggles about the 'living wage': as they put it 'the fight against rising prices' is 'the other side of the wages coin' (Nottingham Prices Campaign N.D.: 3). However, the Campaign also highlighted how price rises were a feminist issue because they intensified women's oppression by increasing time spent on housework as women went on 'frantic shopping

safaris' and spent more time cooking as convenience foods became more expensive (Nottingham Prices Campaign, N.D.: 1). If the Campaign was successful in forcing a local supermarket to reconsider its pricing policy, the organizers also believed that the campaign had the potential to unite women who had been isolated at home as 'a powerful force' as they came to understand their common experience of oppression (Nottingham Prices Campaign, N.D.: 2).

LEFC also had its origins in the prices campaign 'We Pay, They Profit' organized by East London Big Flame (ELBF), a local branch of the English libertarian Marxist organization, in London's Roman Road market during Autumn 1973.[vii] As in Nottingham, the campaign highlighted the politics of the living wage – 'A PRICE RISE IS A WAGE CUT' – and identified profiteering by retail chains and manufacturers as the key source of rising prices (ELBF 1973b). While the Nottingham women saw the prices campaign as having the potential to create new forms of political identity beyond the immediate concern with inflation, this had failed to transpire and, as a result, the ELBF women explored alternative avenues which could connect the gendered impact of price rises with a wider politics which could combat women's 'isolation and alienation' under capitalism (ELBF 1973a). The result was the Lincoln Estate Food Coop (March 1974 – late 1975) located on a large-scale council housing development in East London. Initially publicized via word of mouth and leafleting and then through a stall selling cheap food, the Coop enabled the Big Flame women to share some of the same networks and

experiences as the working-class women on the estate as they worked together buying and distributing goods. Unlike many other food coops which saw their eating practices as a form of 'lifestyle politics', the LEFC was partly an attempt to improve the material conditions (rather than the cultural preferences) of its working-class participants and, as a result, it focused on getting basic goods such as bacon, cheese and washing powder at cheap prices.[viii] Therefore, for the ELBF women, 'consuming differently' was not organized around objects of consumption but centred around a strategy for connecting alternative forms of distribution with gendered domestic consumption practices.

This approach was underpinned by a politics of 'community struggle' shaped by three key influences. First, 'the community' was seen a key site for feminist politics because it created the possibility of building networks and institutions based on 'self-help' that could improve women's lives (and potentially change their consciousness), an approach implicit in Sylvia Pankhurst's work in the East End earlier in the century (Rowbotham 2010). Second, Big Flame's politics were strongly influenced by the Italian Marxist group Lotta Continua (1973) who believed that 'community struggle' in the spaces and institutions of the city offered the potential for workers to fight for power. Tactics such as rent strikes and pickets against food prices meant that struggles over consumption became a key strand of their practice. This provided a blueprint for some of Big Flame's own initiatives: for example, during the rent strikes on Tower Hill estate in 1972-3, Big Flame women in Liverpool targeted

consumption practices as a means of politicizing everyday life. Likewise, the LEFC was based on a model of political practice based on 'integration into the daily life and daily struggles' of an area, 'to be part of existing networks' (ELBF 1974: no page number). Finally, ideas from feminism and the Italian left came together in Maria Rosa Dalla Costa's intervention in debates about the sexual division of labour. For Dalla Costa, the housewife was the key political subject in the politics of the community ('the social factory'): by engaging in community activism, she argued, women could combat the isolation which had deprived them of the collective experience of struggle and gain 'the experience of social revolt… the experience of learning your own capacities, that is, your power, and the capacities, the power of your class' (Dalla Costa and James 1975: 30).[ix] Therefore, for the ELBF women, the LEFC was understood as a form of community struggle that could empower women through an engagement with a gendered politics of 'getting and spending'. Furthermore, they saw a socialist-feminist politics of community struggle as creating possibilities for new forms of political subjectivity for women who had been marginalized from political struggle.

The Coop politicized the practice of shopping by collectivizing it within 'the community'. It offered its members the opportunity to make shopping a more collective, social experience and to reduce the burden of domestic labour in the process. However, this was not without its problems: for some members, shopping was an important source of pride and identity that enabled them to demonstrate their skills as 'good shoppers and skillful low-budget cooks'

(ELBF 1974: 10) and acted as a defence against representations of working-class women as feckless, gullible and irrational consumers. While investments in these skills initially set some women in competition with each other, the LEFC created opportunities to use them as a form of collective strength. Buying goods from producers and wholesalers also enabled members to locate their shopping practices within a wider economic context: as one woman put it, 'you take part in the whole process… You're more involved, you don't just walk into a shop and take it off the shelf. You're aware just how much profit the shopkeepers are making' (LEFC 1975: [3]). In this way, the Coop created a political awareness of the relationships between consumers and retailers and generated a sense of empowerment. 'The experience of social revolt' provided a shared sense of political identity and power: as one member stated, 'we've taken our own action on food prices' (LEFC 1975: [3]). This experience also generated wider forms of political engagement in both feminist politics and community struggle: for example, Coop members were involved in a playgroup and a 'self help therapy group' which outlived the LEFC (LEFC 1975: [11-12]).

The Coop also highlighted how collective consumption practices could reduce – and transform the nature of – domestic labour and the ELBF women were influenced by debates about 'Wages for Housework'. For some members, this simply made housework less boring and alienating but, for others, it demonstrated the potential for collectivizing other forms of housework. Within both first- and second-wave feminism, socialized nurseries, launderettes and

eating places were seen as a means of combating women's isolation and exploitation within the home (Rowbotham 1972; Segal 1979), although there was disquiet about the potential of this provision to be marketized (Benston 1980; Morton 1980). For Coop members, shared housework offered to reduce the time spent on housework – 'instead of having 100 kitchens have 10 kitchens… so that all the ladies can have time off' (LEFC 1975: [4]) – and to transform their experience of the world – 'It means more to me than just getting cheaper food together, it's the beginning of organizing our lives differently' (LEFC 1975: [5]). Furthermore, collective housework could also reduce individualized consumption of consumer durables by challenging 'the family as the unit of consumption'. By storing food purchases across members' fridges and freezers, these appliances could be resignified as items of collective rather than privatized consumption (ELBF 1974: 10).

However, collective buying practices also had the ability to empower women to resist the gendered power relations underpinning domestic consumption practices. Members' recognition that they were involved in socially and economically valuable labour in the Coop enabled them to challenge power relations in the home: 'You are solid against your husband: if he puts you down you've got something to answer back, constructively' (LEFC 1975: [3]). Furthermore, the Coop also changed

> the relations of the women involved to their husbands in their role as shopper: whereas before they always did shopping personally for him, here is now a group of women who make decisions about what to get…

> [and] collectively present some kind of reference point independent of the husband, questioning his own fads and setting up collective norms of consumption of its own. (ELBF 1974: 10)

As the title of Anne Murcott's (1995) article 'It's a pleasure to cook for him' suggests, studies of women's domestic cooking practices demonstrate how the choice of what to cook and eat is done 'in the service of some other(s)' (see also Charles and Kerr 1988). By bracketing food provision from the need to meet the demands of family members, the collective consumption of goods according to the values of an external group not only reduced the labour of shopping for food but also reduced the mental and emotional work of planning and organizing to meet the needs of others performed by individual women within their own immediate relationships (Giard 1998; DeVault 1991). Tellingly there is no discussion here of children. While the ability to put collective choices about what to buy above the tastes and preferences of men sits happily within feminist theorizing, the ability to challenge caring work in relation to children has proved more problematic (Miller 1998: 98). Nonetheless, collective consumption practices organized around buying within the Coop offered the potential to intervene in domestic consumption practices. As the Big Flame women put it, 'The fight against prices is not just against the shops/distributors/food manufacturers, whose profits we hit only slightly, but also the relationships that are part and parcel of consumption e.g. the family position of women' (ELBF 1974: 10) The LEFC therefore represented an attempt to connect the ethical concerns of feminism that focused on overcoming oppression with the 'ordinarily ethical' caring work that is

intimately bound up with doing femininity within the social relations of the family.

Echoing some other socialist feminists, the ELBF women challenged the tendency to represent women's consumption practices as leisure by classifying consumption as a form of domestic labour. However, they also argued that the significance of consumption in terms of identity and social relations couldn't be entirely grasped 'under a "housework" heading' (ELBF 1974: 9). In their rejection of a 'conventional' feminist position which portrayed the female consumer under capitalism as the passive victim of psychic manipulation, the Big Flame women also acknowledged that, especially for working-class women, consumption practices could be a source of meaningful pleasures that made oppression easier to live with. They also rejected the idea that these pleasures were simply trivial and a form of 'false consciousness': as Dalla Costa had argued, 'Intellectuals buy books, but no-one calls them trivial' (Dalla Costa and James 1975: 45). Instead, the ELBF women suggested that feminists needed to reflect on their own consumption practices and how their class position enabled them to choose whether to consume 'less' or 'differently', choices that weren't open to the working-class women in the LEFC. This reflexivity provides evidence of a rather different trajectory of second-wave thought about consumption that has been lost in the reproduction of the 'conventional' position. The ELBF women acknowledged that 'We have… tended to see ourselves as somehow outside a lot of consumerism' and that the Coop had encouraged them 'not to mystify

our present situations' (ELBF 1974: 5). Their reflections therefore raise an issue largely lost in most feminist positions on consumption: if most feminists' access to goods is inevitably structured by the market, then what does it mean to consume as a feminist?

Conclusions

The 'conventional' second-wave feminist position on consumption emphasizes the power of consumer culture over its feminine victims, a position that creates little need to engage with women's everyday consumption practices. This not only results in a lack of reflexivity about how feminists might or should engage with the market beyond a position of abstinence but it also leaves little room for a politics which can engage with women's lived experience of consumption. In this article, I've tried to document a strand of activism in the women's movement of the early-mid 1970s that responded to the effects of rising food prices and highlighted the need to use consumption practices as a site of struggle to fight against women's oppression. While the feminists involved were critical of the power of consumer culture over women, they did not see consumption practices simply as a mirror of the needs of consumer culture but as a potential site for feminist activism. By disarticulating the identity of 'the female consumer' from that of 'the housewife', this focus on prices enabled a form of feminist politics but which created the potential for activism that cut across divisions between women based on age, sexuality, relationship to the labour market, class and 'race'.

This focus on elements of the women's movement that are marginal to both feminist histories and theories enables us to begin to tell other stories about feminism, especially ones where the politics of class were very much 'live' in both the US and UK (see Hemmings 2005). It also contributes to a process through which we can begin to identify and examine a range of feminist perspectives on consumption and think about what they can both add to – and learn from – the field of consumption studies and contemporary activism around ethical consumption. Instead of locating feminism as 'outside' of - and indeed 'above' - consumer culture, the case of the LEFC demonstrates a different tradition within second-wave feminism that emerges from an engagement with the location of the consumer. Such an approach demands that feminist ethics aren't simply seen as something that can be used to educate consumers but instead acknowledges that consumption practices already contain ethical dimensions, especially in relationship to the importance of caring work in 'doing femininity' (DeVault 1991; Miller 1998). Drawing on a Foucauldian understanding of ethics, Barnett et al (2005: 28) argue that if 'the activity of constructing a life by negotiating practical choices about personal conduct, then the very basics of routine consumption – a concern for value for money, quality, and so on – can be seen to presuppose a set of specific learned ethical competencies.' 1970s' feminist activism which focused on the politics of 'getting and spending' provides one way of imagining a feminist politics of consumption which connected feminist ideas with these 'ordinary' ethics.

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[ii] Although see Bristor and Fischler (1993) and Caterrall et al (2005) for attempts to work through feminist approaches to consumption.

[iii] For my other work that contributes towards this project, see XXXX (2013) on the representation of consumer culture and consumption in the British feminist magazine *Spare Rib* and and XXXX (forthcoming) on the use of the market to create an 'alternative woman's culture' within US cultural feminism. Although there focus is different to mine, some other recent work also highlights aspects of the use of the market within feminist activism (Enke 2007; Murray 2007), on the use of boycotts as a form of feminist activism (for example, Bronstein 2008) and the use of sit-ins and pickets to protest against unequal access to 'public accommodations' (Hickey 2008).

[iv] The more mainstream *Ms*. Magazine was alone in isolating organized crime as a key cause.

[v] For example, the National Housewives Association's boycott of supermarkets in Derby and protests in York which succeeded in getting price reductions of pensioners at a local supermarket (ELBF 1973a and !973b).

[vi] Many of the documents used are located in London's Women's Library, although some were from the personal files of ex-members of LEFC. The interview with four ex-members of LEFC took place in December 2011.

[vii] ELBF were a short-lived and 'dissident section' within Big Flame (personal email from ex-member of LEFC).

[viii] There is evidence of other feminist activists in West London and Liverpool using food coops to both obtain cheaper food and organize around women's domestic roles (Arsenal Group N.D.).

[ix] This was originally published in 1972. Precise details of authorship are still disputed.