Shopping with and for Virtues

Why Virtues Today?

Virtues are generic benchmarks to help us navigate in the debates on what is good and bad, right and wrong, and who are them and us. They have always played a role in politics, community, and in economic and private life. We use virtues as a basis for passing judgment on politicians, company owners, people we meet in brief but frequent daily encounters, and in family relations. Virtues and ethics are again a public focus because we sense that social, political, and economic interactions have changed and this threatens the roots and values embedded in our political, economic, and social communities. The shifts to globalization, individualization, postmodernization, risk society, and governance discussed in chapter 1 make us ponder about the quality of political, social, and economic life and make us aware that our communities are local, national, regional, and global in orientation. The shifts also imply that today more responsibility is put on individuals to formulate their own conceptions of right and wrong.

Good responsibility-taking requires the use of virtues.

An important finding reported in this book is that we now see a new sharing of responsibility for setting moral standards among the political, economic, and private spheres. A consequence of the political landscape changes—governance, globalization, individualization, postmodernization, and reflexive modernization—is that it is no longer possible to make sharp distinctions between politics, economics, and private life. This means that we as individuals cannot assume that we have taken sufficient responsibility for ensuring a good life and a sustainable future by voting in elections and paying fees to membership associations. The complexities of contemporary life have broadened the meaning of the term political. Our everyday conduct crosses the divide between politics, economics, and private life and, as reflected in the footprint metaphor, this crossover is increasingly important for our understanding of politics.
Virtues help people understand the importance of their everyday lives for other people’s daily existence. Classic character virtues help people formulate their more individualized philosophy of life and apply their life philosophies in the different spheres in a coherent fashion. These virtues appear in the phenomenon of political consumerism. This book has discussed in different ways how political consumerism is developing as an ethical guideline for citizens to take responsibility in our more complex, risk-filled, globalized world. Whether in the form of boycotts or buycotts, political consumerism brings virtues to the marketplace and into everyday consumer choices. Consumers in growing numbers shop with and for virtues. They make consumer choices on the basis of their virtues, and boycott and buycott campaigns encourage people to demand that virtues are present in marketplace transactions. Virtues are used to assess the politics behind the products sold in the global marketplace. But just like any other public or private activity, political consumerism is not necessarily only a virtuous phenomenon. The anti-Jewish boycott in the 1930s shows how vices can be practiced in shopping situations, and the Disney boycott illustrates well how political consumerist activities can include both virtues and vices. It is also the case that virtues can be understood differently. People may, as exemplified by the boycotts against Jewish merchants by African Americans, discussed in chapter 2, take their own situation as the point of departure for evaluating justice and fairness.

Yet what is interesting with the phenomenon of political consumerism is its normative stance that virtues should be embedded in market transactions. Democratic political consumerism is a virtue-practicing activity. As such, it is an example of phronesis: virtues in action in everyday settings. Both classical and civic virtues are in play. We see the classical virtues of courage, uprightness, moderation, and fair-mindedness in many of the examples discussed in chapters 2–4. These classical character traits are crucial in situations in which citizens take more responsibility in their own hands. They are what Tocqueville would perhaps have called necessary virtues for the right kind of self-interest and what Shelly Burtt, the political philosopher discussed in chapter 1, would view as essential traits for a non-privatist understanding of self-interest. Scholars of postmodernization and reflexive modernization would define them as the core of individualization. Uprightness and fair-mindedness place self-interest in a broader context. They allow people to embed their concerns in societal and public concerns without requiring that they renounce their self-interests entirely. Uprightness and fair-mindedness are the basis of the private