

# Let's Boycott Everything!

## Abstract

Boycott is one of the well known but less used tools of dissent. We currently spend more time demonstrating, signing petitions and Twittering. This is a personal and occasionally philosophical view of boycott, some speculation about the associated logic, ethics and practical issues.

I will also try to touch on the place of boycott in the age of platforms and networks.

Participants may also choose to take part in my (super-duper-fun) Supermarket Evil Ranking experiment during/after the talk.

## Introduction

Welcome to the wonderful but strange world of mutated late 1960s radicalism! I'm grateful to Simon who, albeit somewhat accidentally suggested this talk in the following conversation:

Simon: It's on the philosophy society Facebook page

Hugh: I don't have Facebook.

Simon: We have a WhatsApp group.

Hugh: I don't have WhatsApp. Actually I don't have a smart phone except for software development.

I have these conversations, usually about once a week, especially with respect to Facebook and mobile phones. Arguably, the smart phone thing is a different matter, although, for example, I have serious reservations about Google, Apple and Microsoft. I also don't have LinkedIn, Instagram and the other detritus of mistaken modernity. I do currently have Twitter but will probably give it up this year as a resolution. I would say this talk is a mixture of philosophy, of a sort and potential praxis.

My focus, for this talk, is consumer boycott that now includes 'platform' boycott, for the reason that Coluche (the Bill Hicks of Francophonie) stated succinctly:

*"Quand on pense qu'il suffirait que les gens n'achètent pas pour que ça ne se vende plus !"*  
Coluche, *Misère*, 1978

## History

A tiny sliver of history, so we may be able to win at Mastermind later on. This is from Wikipedia. Boycott is named after Charles Boycott, who was a land agent in Ireland in the 1880s. During a campaign against evictions and raised rents, Irish tenants and labourers withdrew labour during the harvest. They, also, as a secondary matter, would not cooperate with those that cooperated with boycott. There's a lot more, but look it up.

## Definition

*Withdraw from commercial or social relations with (a country, organization, or person) as a punishment or protest.* That's Google, there seems to be a promising little uptick in the graph of usage that comes with it too.

The scope is very broad and the definition doesn't seem to include the agent that does the withdrawing. I'm mainly concentrating on individuals and loosely aligned groups of individuals.

## Literature

There's about 8K articles with boycott in the title in the elibrary. Interestingly there's only one with boycott and logic in the title:

*Why boycott? Collective logic and individual stances: an analysis of representation systems applied to the case of Danone.*

## Logic

1. Certainly boycott contains a propositional attitude of definite kind. For example, we have some (maybe mistaken) beliefs about the goods or services we boycott or are thinking about boycotting.

Sheer taste, 'I don't like ice cream brand X, it tastes of used car tyres', probably doesn't do it, however, bad value might but, as a signal that producers of X were perceived to be profiteering.

I might like ice cream brand X but dislike the exploitation of Oompa-Loompas involved in its production. Or, that flowers used to flavour it also supply vitamins to the last herd of unicorns.

2. There is usually a particular direction of fit in the attitude, we hope, wish etc. to change something or other. Or, perhaps, we fear the results of something or other continuing.

3. In consumer boycott, there's usually some kind of set theoretic relationship between the product or service and the organisation responsible for it. More about this later.

4. There's usually at least 1 to 1 correspondence between boycott and 'communication about the boycott'. The form of this is pretty elastic, communication amongst the boycotters only (quite fun), boycotters and towards to boycotted, towards anyone within range, press etc. If the desired result, for example is bankruptcy of the boycotted, arguably there's no need to communicate towards them.

5. If it's a necessity and there's a monopoly, boycotters are potentially cornered. I hate Thames Water for example. However, I now have multiple rain collectors and try to remain as filthy as is socially acceptable (that's a joke BTW). See discussion about partial boycott, it probably isn't a binary.

I'm sure there's more, but this gives something to play around with.

## Why Oh Why?

It's one of the decreasing and also, potentially effective options for activism:

1. Government petitions are, in my opinion, a weapon of mass distraction, shame that humour has been outlawed too. Very good one before that asking George Brown to nail jelly to the wall, whilst juggling
2. Demonstrations led to kettling, provocation, intelligence gathering by the police and are ineffective (how many millions marched against the Iraq war? Was it stopped?). This point has just been made in the Graun about the anti-Trump march. As I write, the television news is talking about 'illegal demonstrations', we may need to return to this. However, I agree, and as someone recently wrote they provide networking, solidarity and emotional comfort.
3. It's terrifically legal, at the moment, the feds/five-o cannot march you to to supermarket and make you buy something. I'm wondering if this could be changed in any alternative future? Binary purchase.
4. It's simple and easy to understand, does not require a great deal of philosophic baggage or other intellectual claptrap. It passes the KISS test. Reaching down.
5. In terms of (my) higher goals, commercial boycott is often 'anti-stuff', a public good as there should clearly be 'less'. Of course, we need a week long debate about this, is less ice-cream 'good', for example?
6. Platform boycott represents, as Bill & Ted would probably say, an excellent opportunity. Microsoft valued LinkedIn at \$26bn, if everyone left, it's worth 'next to nothing', creative destruction as Schumpeter would say. Even if 10% left, Reed's law would probably operate and the reduction in 'value' **may be** logarithmic. However, see Dunbar's number etc. whole thing may be overstated.

**Reed's law** is the assertion of [David P. Reed](#) that the utility of large networks, particularly social networks, can scale exponentially with the size of the network.

The reason for this is that the number of possible sub-groups of network participants is  $2^N - N - 1$ , where  $N$  is the number of participants. This grows much more rapidly than either

See: <http://www.ibtimes.com/facebook-privacy-social-network-buys-data-third-party-brokers-fill-user-profiles-2466651> Facebook buys data about you from 3<sup>rd</sup> party brokers, too.

## What's Wrong with It?

1. It can hit the wrong goals, punishing the 'innocent'. Incidentally, there's a great joke in Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*. There was a lot of unresolved argument in the days of South African apartheid, that the black working class were being punished by both any national or corporate sanctions. Barclays, with a clear vested interest, argued this. This aspect is a close relative of the utilitarian 'happiness calculus' problem, there's no clear answer.
2. Partial or, in general, badly subscribed boycotts may be ineffectual. Or will they? Because they may, anyway, be useful for changes of attitude and belief in the people trying, see point 6. Umberto Eco: we immediately understood the moral and psychological meaning of the Resistance.
3. Commercial entities are sneaky, multiple brands, multiple channel and takeovers that change processes and name (that could turn something 'good' into some thing 'bad'). See the list of brands associated with Nestle, for example.  
  
Another example, Cadburys a company with an enviable record for social engagement, kept its brand name but was taken over by Mondelez, an ugly transnational, with no talent for making Creme Eggs.
4. At a lower level does boycott fold into 'informed active choice'? Perhaps so, not a bad thing in that case. **See my Supermarket Evil Ranking, please fill in.**
5. Following 4, does the direction of fit also include backpressure, we work on our (Marxist or non-Marxist, I'm not concerned) revolutionary consciousness, by, 'boycotting everything'.
6. Even when our boycotts (or demos) fail, we have connected with others with similar views for the next attempt on the forces of evil. From my highly inadequate focus group, this is one of the main positive externalities.
7. Once we've boycotted everything, what are we left with? Just clothes made of 3 holes cut in a sack and some stones to play with. **Actually, by about next year, I'll try and persuade PhilSoc to let me give a talk on generosity, open source and platform cooperativism.**

## Conclusion

Ok, to misquote a friend who managed to drive the wrong way round Trafalgar Square in dead of night, 'the conclusion is that there is no conclusion'. Just endless debate.

Meanwhile please do my Supermarket Evil Ranking thought experiment, and leave me the results. Intuition, the best philosophical tool currently available to the masses rather than analysis, please. The instructions are at the top of the paper, it is anonymous too.

## Various Bits of Criticism And Feedback

1. Doubts about whether boycott will work at all
2. Suggestion that agitation for data protection laws will work as well for Facebook etc. I doubt it, because a) easy to circumvent b) difficult to frame in light of evolving statistical MI algorithms
3. Mixed approaches demonstrations and boycott. Yes of course
4. Missed the example of the Starbucks boycott last year. Actually it has faded and needs restarting. In fact, because of the corporate structure, this is one of the 'worst'.
5. Need more emphasis on communication of the boycott reason.