

Of Convenience and the Concept of Citizenship

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The burgeoning presence of convenience store franchises around the world has been such an interesting phenomenon. Through this preliminary writing, the author is looking at the phenomena specifically from the perspective of Taiwan which has a staggering number of more than 5000 branches of 7-Eleven (as of 2018). The popularity of such convenience stores provokes the need to understand the tangled relations between these stores and the concept of citizenship. Building on the discussion from the 2017 Annual Report produced by the President Chain Store Corporation, a conglomerate that owns 7-Eleven in Taiwan, the author attempts not only to dissect the changing nature of convenience stores but to juxtapose it in relation with the continuous growth through consumption. Here, the writer tries to argue how the notion of 'convenience' directly shapes the formation of social relations. By reading through David Graeber's theory on consumption to the concept of citizenship espoused by Engin F. Isin and Bryan S. Turner, the writer argues on how it is central to our question in relating the concept of citizenship, nature of consumerism, and potential democratic participation.

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It is everywhere; it demands to be seen and heard with its glittering signboards and affectively charged jingles. The very notion of the word 'convenience' has become very much embedded in our everyday existence. Its existence has always been in the thick of everything that our contemporary socio-economic relations make. Distinguished auteur, Wong Kar Wai, notably in one of his many films, *Chungking Express*, through one of its lead characters wandering around hopping from a convenience store to an express food stall, indirectly offers a glimpse of what we might perceive on how convenience stores become the non-spaces of human interaction and how it is then being appropriated to represent the nature of private-public space nowadays. It is from this brief phenomenon that I would love to attempt and understand the tangled relations of convenience, the concept of citizenship and how it possibly might affect the way we perceive democracy.

Convenience – as a value – has emerged as the most potent dynamics in shaping our social relations. And the staggering number of more than 5000 convenience stores in Taiwan alone proves that thesis. As of the year 2018, and mind you, this is only for 7-Eleven branches which cover almost sixty different business scopes (Annual Report 2017, 52), from our daily munches of tea eggs to placing an order for a taxi pick-up during one of those drunk nights from the bars, we have become heavily dependent on convenience in its many strands. It is the concept of "convenience"; to an

extent, it is the desirability of everything that is a convenience that marks our social relation in locating the discussion in this writing. It permeates – like value, as a way of life, as a conception – in offering a glimpse of our societal formation to consumerism.



["Wuhan / 武汉 | convenience store / 小店"](#) is licensed under [CC BY-NC](#)

In their “Letter to Shareholders” section of the President Chain Store Corporation’s 2017 Annual report, both the Chairman, Chih–Hsien Lo and President, Jui-Tang Chen, illustrate an interesting aim for their company. In the document, both of them are quipping the notion on how “unique, fun and educational shopping experience” can it be with their company in reflecting the “future lifestyle” and “surrounding neighborhood”. In relation to this, it does demand our interrogation to understand the innovative nature of convenience stores further (10). The changing nature of the convenience stores puts the questions of demography at its central stake in negotiating the needs of the aging society in Taiwan, and it does resonate with the diversification of products that it entails. Glancing through the concept of convenience from which we have continuously developed from the late 19th century as a phenomenon, indeed, what central are the defining characteristics of capitalism with endless production of the factory line to continuous growth through consumption of our domestic life.

To put it bluntly, as being discussed by David Graeber (2011) in his monumental essay entitled “Consumption,” paradoxically, “people find most of their life’s pleasure in consumption.” It is within this particular logic that Graeber then criticized the limitation of seeing the people divided into two spheres, as a merely passive consumer and those who are interested to see the dynamics between production and consumption. Here, it should not be perceived as two separate entities but intertwined in its mutative process. At the core, it is the social relation that implicates and resonates with everything political.

Politics here, in its vulgarised notion, as stated in the PCSC Annual Report, is to relate it with the company's mission in order to "practice good corporate citizenship" (10). What exactly does the notion of "corporate citizenship" mean here? Building on this, I am interested in problematizing the notion of citizenship that is being utilized concerning the question of convenience. Not much has been discussed in the report in regard to what the term of "corporate citizenship" exactly is. We can dismiss it merely just as another corporate's copywriting maneuvering. Having said that, in its essence, it is hard not to reflect it with various social relationships that the convenience store's chain embeds and inspires, particularly in observing how extensive the network of the franchise is.

By putting things into perspective, it is critical to highlight how vast the labor workforce is in this particular line of business. For example, the number of laborers working with 7-11's chains itself are hiring almost 50,000 people in various sectors which successfully consolidated revenue of NT\$221.13 billion and net profits of NT\$32.32 billion in the year 2017 (10). In this regard, how do we understand the notion and limitations of citizenship here? How do we then challenge the various concepts of citizenship that prevail in various modern variants?

Much has been discussed in various citizenship studies concerning the word "citizen", which carries various distinctive definitions. As articulated by Engin F. Isin and Bryan S. Turner, the concept of modern citizenship rights was being drawn from "the nation-state typically include civil (free speech and movement, the rule of law), political (voting, seeking the electoral office) and social (welfare, unemployment insurance, and health care) rights" (2011, 3). It is from these fundamental values that the participant in the political life of the community, of which the individual who is a carrier of political rights, the enjoyer of freedom within the community prompted recognition in fostering the concept of citizenship. As a matter of fact, essentially speaking, the citizens are those who are being accorded and acquired both the rights and culture to speak, act, and vote amongst others. Also, it is also not surprising to see how certain economics equates free markets almost in similar veins as democratic practices.

The underlying notion of citizenship here is being made visible or invisible by those who control them – in essence, and it is by the forces of capital; those who have and have-nots, the citizen and non-citizens, etc. How is it then, the term citizenship, being manifested for us to juxtapose it with the so-called "corporate citizenship," which speculatively defines another way to understand the concept of citizenship? What are the logics behind configuring the questions of citizenship and its social relation? What goes beyond that?

As being discussed thoroughly by various academicians, the emergence of what we define as "consumer society" or simply "consumerism" (Berg and Clifford 1999; Smith 2002; Stearns 2001) indirectly intertwines with our questions of citizenship. It is the defining moment when a remarkable portion of the demography could be said to be organizing their lives around the pursuit of something called "consumer goods," which is then reflected in our contemporary logic of social relations. The phenomena are not supposed to be seen in isolation but a continuation of how the process of citizenship is being perceived as an exercise and act of consumerism. Even baffling, it has been grasped as given and posits certain passive roles in defining the nature of citizenship.

Philosopher, Byung-Chul Han, has extensively discussed the linkage of consumerism and the nature of citizenship. Here, he problematizes today's political participation which has been depoliticized in shaping the community as "they react only passively to politics: grumbling and complaining, as

consumers do about a commodity or service they do not like” (2017, 25). It is in this very nature that political participation has been reduced to. In other words, politics is ultimately dispensable – political subjects are merely other consumers or customers in the realm of democracy. Within this particular convenience trajectory, the logic of corporate allows democracy to be a banal process of transforming people into mere spectators. One can only participate in the process if he or she is equipped with capital (whether it is large or small is another story altogether) which indirectly dictates how far one can be involved in the process.

In a highly structured and bureaucratized entity of which profit has been the ultimate drive, it is interesting to see how various social engagements have been made to cultivate a sense of belonging among society. Here, the activities designed by the company range from promoting reading habits, improving education skills set to revitalizing local youth amongst others. Through these particular activities, it comes with a very specific and ultimate objective which is to “ensure the satisfaction of our customers, business partners, shareholders, and society” (11). Here, it has become obvious that the market and society are being perceived as one, singular entities from the perspectives of the conglomerate. Ironically, at the same time, the same conglomerate has been posing a persistent challenge to the proposed adjustment of Taiwan labor laws which will be beneficial in ensuring the better livelihood of their workers.

In relation to this, it is critical to understand the whole phenomenon of the working conditions today with how it was being projected by the influential British economist, John Maynard Keynes. Contradictory to Keynes’s projection at the beginning of the 1930s, he foresees significant improvement of working conditions hence enhancing the labor productivity. Here, he attributes it to the rigorous technical innovation where people are ultimately able to work for only 15-hour per week. This is in line with the possible development of the labor driven by automation technology in the near future. Surprisingly, the workers, particularly in our focus, the convenience store workers, instead have to end up working longer hours under such heavily surveillanced conditions with the repetitive nature of the job to make ends meet.

Instead, this phenomenon has been observed as a natural progression of how works develop along the way by anthropologist, David Graeber (2018). In his authoritative academic work on the notion of “bullshit jobs”, he proposes that the corporations tend to compose more of a controlling job than a productive job. In the end, the jobs are inherently alienating from its process of social relations. Unsurprisingly, it does resonate with how alienating the working condition with democracy in the workplace as well. The rationale behind these jobs lays not only grapples with the question of an economic dimension where the corporate capital has achieved a hegemonic position over the social formation, but also of moral and political issues. Within these complex entanglements, the question demands us to rethink the questions of citizenship within microscopic networks of chain-stores, not as an alien space but of potential space to rethink our participation of democracy beyond normalizing the so-called citizenship through the corporate’s sovereignty.

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