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What's wrong with ethical consumption?

Jo Littler

My opening question is somewhat loaded. To ask what's wrong with ethical consumption is to foreground its problems, its failures, its inability to live up to the promise of its name. This chapter does aim to consider the criticisms – which are many, and varied – of ethical consumption. Such criticisms are widely circulated in day-to-day discourse. They include, for example, the following ideas: that ethical consumption is ultimately ineffective because it is merely used by a minority as a panacea for middle-class guilt; that it is an individualistic form of politics, a means through which neoliberal governments encourage consumers to become 'responsibilised' amidst the atrophying of wider social safety nets; that it is produced primarily through the whitewashing and profit-seeking actions of corporations, and as such can have little radical purchase; and that it is, in itself, a fractured field of often dissociated and contradictory practices, or simply too large a category to be meaningful.

Such issues are important and deserve to be addressed. However, in looking at 'what's wrong with ethical consumption', the aim of the chapter is somewhat broader, as I want to consider some of the key criticisms which have commonly (and not so commonly) been made of the practice as a way of *navigating* this often quite complicated area. This means that the chapter is also open to the potential or 'progressive' possibilities that ethical consumption may have at the same time as looking at its contradictions, pitfalls and dead ends. The chapter therefore summarises different *attitudes* toward these positions, and draws on a number of theories from media and cultural studies and adjacent disciplines to contextualise and interpret them. Charting some of the nascent lines of debate which are emerging around this expanding area can help emphasise how we need to use a broader range of theory in order to consider the complexities of the zone of ethical consumption as a space which, the chapter argues, can be colonised and stratified by both reactionary and progressive forces.

Contradictory consumption

To begin with, I want to engage with the issue of whether or not ethical consumption is a field that is simply too large and fractured to be meaningful. It is certainly the case that an extremely wide range of practices has come to be grouped under the term. These include the creation of fair trade products which aim to give producers a 'decent price' for their labour; of anti-sweatshop products, such as clothes produced by American Apparel or No Sweat; of local products, as popularised, for example, by the Italian 'slow food' movement and local vegetable box schemes; and consuming less by, for instance, 'downshifting' or swapping goods on Freecycle (Sassatelli 2009; Littler and Moor 2008; Parkins and Craig 2006; Soper, Ryle and Thomas 2009; Thomas 2008). It can also include consumer 'buycotts' (boycotting a brand deemed 'unethical', like Nestle or McDonalds, in favour of an 'ethical' brand); consuming organic produce (whether food or T-shirts), supporting 'environmental' or 'green' products, like solar panels and recycled paper; buying anti-genetically modified products; and supporting cause-related marketing (defined by the donation of a small proportion of the products' profits to charity, such as the 'pink products' associated with breast cancer charities) (Ross 1997; Klein 2000; Micheletti 2003; Etsy and Winston 2009; King 2008). Alongside this veritable cornucopia of consumer practices we have a variety of associated activities including consumer campaigning and activism, such as Baby Milk Action's campaigns against the misleading marketing of formula as a 'superior' substitute for breastmilk. (Hilton 2003, 2009)ⁱ

These various practices while nominally ethical are not always compatible and can at times be downright contradictory. Buying 10 organic t-shirts from Marks and Spencer or American Apparel is, for instance, an opposite lifestyle practice to deciding to radically downshift your consumption and

not buy any new clothes at all. Buying fairtrade wine from Chile or Australia contradicts the imperative of 'buying local' to save food miles if you live in Europe. Buying a Starbucks/Product RED coffee is directly opposed to Adbusters campaigns which highlight exploitative practices of transnational corporations such as Starbucks. And so on. This indicates that contemporary ethical consumption is no mere simple force for progressive social change, but rather one which is constituted of a battery of different practices which can at times conflict with each other. In this sense, we might say, ethical consumption is increasingly a zone of 'contradictory consumption'.

Making this point alone does not, however, take us particularly far. But while we will come back to *why* the terrain is so contradictory later on, for now it is perhaps more helpful to find ways to try to navigate it by describing some of the key differences between these practices. One useful basic means of doing so is to make a conceptual distinction between 'consumption' and 'consumerism'. Both are complicated words with their own fraught histories and there can at times be considerable overlap in how they are used. However 'consumption' tends to more readily refer to the general 'using up' of an object, good or service, regardless of what kind of economic or ideological context the consumption is happening in. 'Consumerism', on the other hand, is more often used to refer to the logic of consuming within a particular type of social and political system: consumer capitalism. In these terms, being 'anti-consumerism' means railing 'against' capitalist consumer culture – or more specifically the current mode of 'turbo consumerism' that marks contemporary neoliberalism. Examples of this include arguing against the promotion of commodities on childrens' TV or the hypocrisy of corporate 'greenwash', campaigning against multinational clothing companies' use of sweatshop labour, or supporting co-operatives. By contrast being 'anti-consumption' means simply advocating consuming less, whatever the economic system (although importantly, strictly speaking, to be actually 'against consumption' is an untenable position, given that we all need to consume to live).

The conceptual distinction between these areas can help us to describe some of the differences between various forms of ethical consumption and their internal complexities. Some activities, for example, fall more clearly into one particular camp. Adbusters are primarily anti-consumerist in outlook, in that their subvertisements poke fun at the inanities of contemporary neoliberal consumer culture. The American 'voluntary simplicity' movement has mainly been 'anti-consumption' in its leanings, as it has primarily been concerned with using fewer consumer objects, even though ironically its style and imagery spawned many new 'hippie' commodities and services (Elgin 1981; Frank 1997). Some actions cross into both: *Buy Nothing Christmas* is for some people a tool to critique contemporary neoliberal consumer culture and for others an opportunity to simply buy less stuff. Finally, there are forms like the cause-related marketing campaign Product RED which fall into neither category (Banet-Weiser and Lapsansky 2008). RED is not critical of corporate consumer culture, nor interested in slowing consumption: on the contrary, it seeks to expand the revenues of companies like Armani, Starbucks and American Express through promoting their (quite limited) association with an anti-AIDS charity and to galvanise consumption of their products.

The terms 'consumption' and 'consumerism' can also help explain why 'ethical consumerism' is for many people a tautology, or impossibility; for neoliberal capitalism relies on a structural disparity between rich and poor, and is therefore not itself an 'ethical' system to those whose ethical standards include a belief in socio-economic equity. 'Ethical *consumption*', on the other hand, is a much broader term, encompassing as it does acts of consuming within a wide range of economic systems. However, one notable complication here is that whilst 'consumerism' is dominantly used to refer to the system of consumer capitalism which has emerged since the mid-twentieth century – or to the gradual emergence of a post-Fordist, 'consumer-led' marketplace – the word also has another meaning, referring to the consumer movement which emerged alongside it which campaigned for value for money and the comparative testing of consumer goods. This movement is thoroughly documented in Matthew Hilton's work (2003, 2007, 2009). Hilton argues that the submergence of this definition of consumerism represents how its movement 'has been outgunned and defeated in many ways, [as] instead the dominant definition of consumer society promoted by the institutions of global governance has been the impoverished language of choice [...which]

creates barriers between those who can and cannot participate in consumer society' (Hilton 2009: 249-250).

Hilton's work, on consumerism also foregrounds the historical and geographical dimensions of ethical consumption. From the Swadeshi movement, in which Gandhi urged people to 'buy Indian' products to combat British imperialism (an early example of a 'boycott'), through the 'White Triangle' anti-sweatshop products sold in the US, to the anti-slavery sugar sold in Europe, ethical consumption has both a long, and wide, history, as a number of commentators have highlighted (Cohen 2003, Hilton 2003, 2007, 2009, Frank 2000, Micheletti 2003). One useful schematisation of ethical consumption's broader historical landscape is Gabriel and Lang's analysis of four main different consumer 'waves' or stages taking place during the twentieth century in the West: co-operative consumers; 'value for money' consumers, as represented by the magazine *Which?*; Naderism, after Ralph Nader's early legal work from the 1960s which represented little Davids against the Goliaths of big corporations; and the 'alternative consumerism' that emerged as a reaction to the Reagan and Thatcher years, through which ethical consumption as we know it today became a powerful force (1995: 152-172; 2005: 39-53). Meanwhile, studies of the *geographies* of ethical consumption is a more recently expanding area, and includes work on the global supply chains between consumer and producer (as in work around the 'fetishised defetishisation' of fairtrade, for example) and the global nature of consumer resistance movements and their local specificities (Zick Varul 2008, Goodman 2009, Hilton 2009)

These varied geographies and histories are a key reason as to why ethical consumption does not have a consistent terminology. The phrase 'political consumerism' for instance has been more widely used in Scandinavia; this term is more capacious in its ability to include boycotts and protests alongside various forms of consumption, reflecting the social-democratic heritage of the area (Micheletti 2003). The sheer variety of these practices and cultural differences in conceptions of consumer practices means that, as the field proliferates, it is increasingly necessary to define what type of 'ethical consumption' is under discussion. In fact, even the term 'ethical consumption' itself is relatively recent in its widespread use, becoming popular over the last few decades alongside the rise of 'organic' and 'green' products and the boom in fairtrade (Harrison et al 2005; Nicholls and Opal 2005). It is also itself a historically and culturally specific term: it marks one particular moment which has been seized not only by activists attempting to translate egalitarian politics into the field of consumption, but, increasingly, neoliberal corporations adopting various forms of 'ethical consumption' to attract customers and create profit.

Radical consumption or corporate co-option?

This brings us to the second key question asked by this chapter, of whether ethical consumption is produced primarily through the whitewashing, greenwashing and profit-seeking actions of corporations. Is its 'radical' or 'progressive' impact negligible because of this corporate involvement?

Here it is important to point out that by no means *all* ethical consumption is produced by corporations: there are many co-operatives in existence producing ethical goods and services. These include individual initiatives such as co-operative food shops like Park Slope in Brooklyn in the US, or Infinity Foods in Brighton in the UK. Then there are larger organisations such as The Co-operative Group in the UK (the organisational descendant of the 19th Rochdale Pioneers, whose various components include a bank, a chain of convenience stores and funeral parlours) or the many farming co-operatives in France, as championed by Jose Bové and the Confederation Paysanne (Bové and Dufour 2001).

Whilst it is certainly the case that the recent expansion of corporate involvement in this sphere has been substantial, the specific effects depend on which particular segment of 'ethical consumption' we are talking about. Products sold as 'organic' in Europe and the US, for instance, are subject to stringent legal regulations and nothing which fails to meet specific criteria can be legally sold as organic. 'Green products', on the other hand, are a much more ambiguously defined and less tightly

legislated area and so are ripe for exploitation. Many corporations are attempting to make promotional capital from 'greening' their image: for example, in the US in 2007, Home Depot reclassified 60,000 of its existing 176,000 lines products as 'green', often on tenuous and contradictory grounds: 'plastic-handled paintbrushes were called nature-friendly because they were not made of wood. Wood-handled paintbrushes were promoted as better for the planet because they were not made of plastic. An electric chainsaw? Green, because it was not gas-powered' (Krauss 2007: 1). Meanwhile, over in Britain, the British Advertising Standards Association ruled that ads by car manufacturer Lexus and petrochemical giant Shell should be banned, as they both misled the public with their green claims. (ASA 2008, 7-8).

As I have discussed elsewhere, this problem of 'greenwashing' is rapidly increasing both in terms of its sheer quantity and the degree of its complex permutations (Littler 2009a; 2009c). One way of comprehending it is to situate greenwashing in relation to the broader activity through which many corporations have, over the past few decades, steadily increased their interest in the domain of 'corporate social responsibility' or CSR. CSR encompasses a variety of corporate activities – sponsoring charities, cause-related marketing (e.g. supermarkets producing 'school vouchers') and annual audits outlining 'community involvement'. The argument over whether corporations *should* be engaged in broader community activities and in public-private partnerships is a fraught one, and one which does not necessarily neatly map onto left/right political divisions. The influential neoliberal theorist Milton Friedman, for example, continually argued against CSR on the grounds that it detracts from the profit motive; whereas the equally neoliberal marketing guru Philip Kotler has continually argued that it enhances profits (Kotler and Lee 2006). The campaign organisation the CORE coalition - which includes a number of NGOs like Friends of the Earth, Amnesty and Christian Aid - has pointed out at length the intense contradictions of many CSR campaigns and the social damage which has been carried out under its name (CORE 2009; Christian Aid 2004). CORE argues that the term 'Corporate Social *Responsibility*' should be replaced by 'Corporate Social *Accountability*': because corporations need to be held to account *by society*, rather than, for example, handed the power to make social decisions about healthcare and education. As I have argued elsewhere, we might draw from these terms to understand CSR as, above all, a *discursive contest for control over the social* (Littler 2009: 50-69).

A similar logic or set of limitations applies to ethical consumerism, to which CSR is in many ways intimately connected. This is because 'ethical' products and services produced by corporations *can* indeed be of progressive value, but, crucially, only at the whims of corporations themselves; and in addition corporations may hype their claims or use them to hide more exploitative aspects of their practice. (Wal-Mart, for example, is routinely accused of greenwash because it heavily promotes its two 'green stores' in the US whilst its thousands of other stores remain resolutely 'un-green'; see Clark 2006, Spotts 2006). The only means through which ethical products produced by corporations can be *relied* upon is if minimum 'ethical' standards are enforced through national and international regulation: through which particular types of substandard, unsustainable or exploitative products – whether fridges pumping out excess CO₂ or computers assembled by children - are banned. In terms of the 'ethics' of equality, any strictly equal mode of production necessitates producing on a co-operative basis. In other words, we might say, it is only when Corporate Social *Accountability* gains steam, and when individual involvements with collective *co-operatives* expand, that consumption will become more genuinely 'radical'.

Ethical consumption and the 'responsibilisation' of the individual

But where does this leave the role of the individual in relation to ethical consumption? Can we say that ethical consumption is an individualistic form of politics, a means through which neoliberal governments encourage consumers to become 'responsibilised' amidst the atrophying of wider social safety nets? Or is a zone of democratic potential, engaging people in places and ways that conventional politics cannot reach?

Academics have argued in both directions. At one end of the spectrum is the argument that the individualisation of ethical consumption can be an empowering form of 'productive democracy'.ⁱⁱ

Mica Nava and Ulrich Beck have for example both gestured toward the political possibilities of ethical purchasing (Beck 1997; Nava 1992: 195-200). For Michele Micheletti, ethical consumption 'expands the policymaking process and plays a role in reinventing politics and democracy' (Micheletti 2003: 14). Most recently, the work of Clive Barnett *et al* into the subjects and spaces of ethical consumption has argued that it "is a political phenomenon in which everyday consumption practices are reconstituted as the sites for citizenly acts that reach beyond the realm of consumption *per se*" (Barnett *et al* 2007).

On the other hand, a number of commentators have argued that ethical consumption is not only restrictive but damaging. The area in which these arguments have been most pronounced tends to be in work on governmentality and environmentalism. Tim Forsyth and Zoe Young have for example argued that we are in 'a new green order' where politicians announce that debate over climate change should begin, but that the answers are all sewn up:

There seems to be a consensus among global elites about where to start (be afraid, be very afraid....but always trust the government), how to address the challenge (change development patterns in the South to 'offset' carbon emissions produced by business as usual in the North), and who is responsible (mainly you and me). Real doubts and arguments are suppressed while market friendly 'solutions' are served up on a nice, glossy plate (Forsyth and Young 2007, 29).

These terms are similar to Timothy Luke's analysis of 'green governmentality' in which state environmental policy and discourse is preoccupied with the 'conduct of conduct' of individuals within that system, and George Monbiot's searing critique of 'eco-junk' as a deluded solution to environmental crisis (Luke 1999; Monbiot 2007b). These anti-ethical-consumption narratives argue that people's fears are being channelled into one set of neoliberal solutions. The individual is burdened with an overwhelming, rather than partial responsibility for change—what scholars drawing upon Michel Foucault's work on governmentality call 'responsibilisation'. In these terms, ethical consumption is a symptom of a profoundly individualistic society in which individuals are being presented with both the opportunity and responsibility of tackling a number of deep-rooted social problems – poverty, exploitation, mass industrialisation, pollution – through their purchasing decisions in a world in which we are encouraged to 'shop for change'.

Both positions can themselves have different politics to them and degrees of sophistication. Governmentality approaches – with their emphasis on the transmission of power through rationalities, mentalities and technologies in everyday life - tend to interpret ethical consumption from a somewhat 'top-down' perspective, whereas 'productive democracy' approaches tend to interpret green products by privileging 'bottom-up' systems of people power. And it is here that we can see both the strength and weaknesses of both positions. The key strength of a 'responsibilisation' narrative is its ability to demonstrate how individual acts are encouraged through multiple sites and particular discourses; its danger - in its more reductive incarnations - is of pompously dismissing consumption as little more than false consciousness and providing an account of a relatively hermetic system of neoliberalism without showing an awareness of how this is supported or challenged through a variety of different sites and locations. The key strength of the 'productive democracy' narrative is in recognising the political potential of the very *enthusiasm* people can bring to ethical consumption; its key danger is in offering a celebratory individualism without locating its analysis in relation to larger political systems.

We might say that there is therefore, as I have argued elsewhere, much to be gained from bringing sophisticated versions of both these approaches together, alongside other relevant tools (Littler 2009: 92-115). There is a need to look at ethical consumption in its particularity, whether as a specific instance or a wider 'subgenre', and to ask what are the specific power dynamics and affective charges in circulation. Only then can we tell whether, and how, the particular type of ethical consumption under discussion is working as a 'lever for change' (Barnett and Soper 2005) in the

sense of moving towards more forms of equality - whether environmental, mental or social - or whether it subtly works to entrench further inequalities and forms of exploitation.

Sanctimonious shopping: status pursuit for the middle-classes?

The issue of how different kinds of ethical consumption have their own specific power dynamics and affective resonances brings us to the last issue of this chapter: the question of *who* is buying so-called ethical products and *why*. Is ethical consumption mainly used as a high-end status pursuit for the moneyed classes, a panacea for middle-class guilt?

Many commentators have pointed out that ethical consumption is not a fully or particularly democratic mode of political engagement in that it only 'gives votes' to those people who have enough financial and social capital to buy the products in question. It is not available to everybody. This situation is most pronounced in sectors where there is a significant price mark-up for the 'ethical' goods in question, such as organic food, which tends to be sold at a higher premium than non-organic. This gives rise to ethical consumption being used as a mark of social or cultural distinction: as a form of consumption used to discriminate against the less culturally or financially well endowed. Sharon Zukin, for instance, has written about the geography of alternative consumption practices in the US, and of how places like farmers' markets and organic food work to attract processes of gentrification which can exclude and displace working-class and ethnic minority residents and consumers (Zukin 2008: 724-748).

With the rise of anxieties about both sweatshops and global warming, the concepts of consuming less as a means of saving CO₂ and of the 'hidden costs' of buying cheap commodities have become much more popular. These narratives are important, yet one by-product is that both the working-classes and 'developing countries' can at times only too easily be made scapegoats for the wider problems of contemporary consumerism. For instance, 'The Devil Wears Primark', a UK TV series about sweatshop labour, focused on the labour practice 'behind' the cheap disposable fashion sold in shops like Primark; and in her recent work *The Thrift Book*, the *Sunday Times* columnist India Knight railed against the exploitation of budget stores such as – again - Primark (Knight 2009). Whilst the production and distribution of cheap high street commodities undeniably involves ecological and social exploitation, singling out the poorer end of the market as the place consumers should avoid in order to 'make a difference' undeniably discriminates against working-class people, who want access to goods just as much as middle-class people. As David Bosshardt puts it, 'what the customer gets at Dollar Stores is the feeling of at least minimum empowerment, because Dollar Stores offer a mix of consumer products that even the poorest can afford' (Bosshardt 2006: 12). The issue here is that more solidly middle-class high street shops are less often evoked as problematic.

Such scapegoating echoes a longer-standing historical process in which attacks on consumption have been a means of dismissing particular groups of people who are just beginning to obtain more power: whether newly enfranchised white women at the turn of the twentieth century, newly moneyed American teenagers of the mid-twentieth century or newly middle-class Indian and Chinese consumers today (Bowlby 1993; Hebdige 1981; Huyssen 1987). The singling out of the particular consumer traits of such groups can encode classed, gendered and racialised prejudice and anxieties about such groups effectively 'getting above their station' through their erroneous and wayward consumption.

In these terms, ethical consumption functions as a further brand of middle-class distinction, one used to discriminate against the poor, whether 'at home' or overseas. However, it is also equally important to point out that this is by no means always the case. We cannot essentialise ethical consumption as *de facto* middle-class, both because many working-class people embrace it and many middle-class people reject it. In the UK, for instance, large numbers of extremely wealthy middle-class people are not in the least bit concerned about ethical consumption or are either mildly hostile or virulently opposed to it. The Tory MP Anne Widdecombe, for example, notoriously

disparaged fairtrade coffee by saying 'I think conscience coffee tastes ghastly'. It is equally common for articles in mainstream lifestyle media publications to belittle or mock the history of ethical consumption by stating that it 'used to be' worthy/dull/unfashionable 'until recently'. Ethical consumerism is also regularly mocked as ridiculous and abnormal in 'henlit' novels (henlit being chicklit in which the chicks have 'grown up' and had kids) which tend to both feature and be written by wealthy, middle-class women who mock eco-minded and organic-buying mothers (Littler 2009c). Middle-class sneering *at* ethical consumption is therefore just as much a phenomenon as middle-class sneering *at-others* through ethical consumption.

What is less frequently pointed out in such mainstream media discourse is that there are strong historical associations between many disempowered or more 'marginal' groups and ethical consumption. For instance, there is a long history of women's involvement in critical and political consumption, as the historical work of Michele Micheletti, Dana Frank and Lizabeth Cohen has documented; including, for example, US housewives' boycotts against supermarket labour exploitation and women's centrality within the aforementioned Swadeshi movement in India (Cohen 2003, Micheletti 2004, Littler 2009b, Frank 2000). Likewise, working-class communities were pivotal to the emergence of the co-operative movement and still remain crucial as customer-owner-participants of the Co-operative supermarket in the UK, an organisation which also champions fair trade produce.

Ethical consumption is therefore not the exclusive province of the middle-classes. However, 'consumerist' modes of ethical consumption tend to be more oriented to the middle-classes than co-operative endeavours, and it is this type of consumption that is used as a badge of distinction and disparagement in numerous ways. One useful language through which these complications can be thought is Felix Guattari's work in *The Three Ecologies*. This emphasises thinking in terms of social, environmental and mental ecologies and the disjunctions between them. Using this schema, for example, we can describe how particular practices of ethical consumption (like, say, buying organic foods at Wholefoods supermarket in an upper-class area) might embody progressive environmental ecologies (in that they support non-intensive modes of farming and discourage the use of pesticides) but much more unequal social and mental ecologies (in that shopping there becomes a badge of exotic distinction for the rich while the store's non-co-operative hierarchies act to further shore up these inequalities of wealth). Guattari's work also enables us to consider both the affective and emotional dynamics at play and the languages and feelings being mobilised by any particular instance of ethical consumption (which Gay Hawkins work on waste and recycling discusses so well) alongside the circuits of power and wealth in operation (Hawkins 2006).

To conclude, we can say that there is plenty 'wrong' with ethical consumption. It can, for example, be used to shore up inequalities of wealth; to help corporations mislead the public, and avoid being more thoroughly environmentally or socially 'ethical'; to facilitate snobbery; and to distract people from the thorough, ongoing work which needs to be done to create more equal and environmentally sustainable societies -- from tightening up product legislation to facilitating co-operatives to banning corporate exploitation in the field of production, distribution and marketing. However, at the same time, these problems and complications should not blind us to the important fact that can also be plenty 'right' with it. It can help people to 'share the wealth' through consumer co-operatives; it can pressure companies to pay attention to the social and environmental impacts of their products and supply chain; it can offer people an alternative to products produced through exploitation; it can focus our attention on the need for social, psychological and environmental sustainability. This means that, today, exploitation can not only be addressed, and defeated, by consumption labelled as 'ethical', but also produced through it; and so extrapolating the differences between these areas, picking the reasons for these differences apart, and acting on them will be one of the most important ways we might progress as citizens or consumers.

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ⁱ <http://www.babymilkaction.org/>

ⁱⁱ I borrow this term from Robin Murray, who uses it to describe the political potential of public enthusiasm for recycling (Murray 1999). This is obviously quite a different issue from ethical consumption, mainly as it does not involve buying a service; but the term remains a useful one.