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Consumers: agents of change?

Clive Barnett is a human geographer at the Open University and is part of a team working on a project entitled 'Governing the Subjects and Spaces of Ethical Consumption'. Kate Soper, a professor of philosophy and a cultural theorist based at London Metropolitan University, is working with Lyn Thomas on their 'Alternative Hedonism and the Theory and Politics of Consumer Culture' project.¹ Jo Littler interviewed them both about the cultural and political implications of the expansion of green, ethical and anti-consumerism.

JL: Even though green, ethical and anti-consumerism all have a fairly substantial history, why do you think there's an expansion of interest and activity in these areas right now? Does anything mark it out as particularly contemporary?

KS: I think there's a heightened concern with environmental issues and a wider understanding of the links between affluence, poverty and ecological attrition. This is partly as a consequence of the growth of media and information. There's also a growing mainstream concern within Western affluent cultures with the negative aspects of consumerism for one's own personal health, happiness and wellbeing. People are now actually becoming more attuned to some of the less than desirable consequences of the consumer way of life. Together with that is the emergence of a kind of subculture which is not just green, or ethical, but distinctively counter-consumerist (I'm thinking of groups like Adbusters, and Buy Nothing Day) which is linked into the anti-globalisation movement, and is obviously very marginal, but it is still something which I think is a new development. All these aspects connect through the emergence of 'the consumer' as a category, which itself has a long history: but nonetheless it's important part of a sense of our identity, now, that people see themselves as consumers, in a way I think wasn't true in the past. That can sometimes mean that they see themselves as consumers in rather, if you like, shallow ways, and that's what's registered in a lot of the theoretical literature, on the performative dimension of the self, of the possibility of using consumption to change one's identity. But I think it also means, in relation to green and ethical consumption, that people are thinking about consumption as an area where they can have some sort of *accountability* to their culture as well. And that is perhaps something new.

CB: It's also quite important for us to recognise that those three broad labels – ethical, green and anti-consumers – actually might be referring to different things. Often they're the same people, who might belong to the same organisations, but they're not *always*, and so their politics might be quite distinctive. Clearly a lot of ethical consumers are not anti-consumers: ethical consumption is about people actually buying things, from certain places, and thinking about what they buy; it's not about not consuming. Whereas other more dramatic strands including Buy Nothing Day or TV Turnoff Day come from a longer tradition of being much more suspicious of consumerism. So even within whatever we might suggest this 'trend' is, there's a whole different set of things going on, many of which might be significantly in tension.

In the project I'm involved in we're very aware of how the things we're looking at aren't necessarily new, that they have various sorts of histories. So we've thought about how to address exactly this question: is there anything distinctive about it? There are two ways of answering the question: one is to generate a big structural story about changes in the nature of industrial modernity, and the second is to think about why a whole set of actors who are trying to do politics have decided that getting to people *as consumers* might be a good way of working. Because it's very difficult to think of a political campaign or a social movement now which doesn't have a consumer wing to what it does, and that's our way into this issue. So in that sense we're approaching the question backwards, to think about why those organisations might think that consumer-oriented strategies work, and to examine how these repertoires get translated across different fields.

JL: In his book *Consumerism* Matthew Hilton discusses the expansion of consumer-oriented groups during nineteenth century liberalism. There might be an interesting parallel there with the expansion of consumer organisations in our own neoliberal times, even though they're very different eras.

CB: Yes. One of the things we've been looking at is how some ethical consumption strategies and campaigns fit within a broader spectrum of politics. The ethical consumer camp has this interesting rhetorical way of saying 'well, neoliberal markets need to be let loose as this empowers people'. So rather than telling a story about markets and globalisation being *disempowering*, they address people as being *more* empowered by virtue of it. In anti-globalisation discourse consumers are often quite passive, and what these ethical consumption groups do is take that discourse and make it into one which is much more active.

JL: So to what extent do you think green, ethical and anti-consumerism simply acts as a sop or a plaster to ease first world middle-class consciences?

KS: In some ways the shifts are fairly superficial, and are generating new forms of capitalist growth, marketing 'natural' and 'ethical' goods and so on. On the other hand, I think one can sense that what is emerging is a climate of concern which could perhaps ultimately move in directions which have more of a radical impact. Having said that, I think if compassion had been uppermost in the way people relate to the poverty of third world people, or ecological attrition, then we wouldn't be facing the levels of poverty or destitution that we now are. This indicates the importance of building on responses which are both overdetermined and reinforce existing levels of concern for poverty and ecological destruction. It's partly for that reason that I've become interested in these more self-interested motives and am talking about the concept of 'alternative hedonism', or the ways people are beginning to feel that it may be that certain moves away from a more consumerist mode of consumption is in actually their own interests, as well as having welcome consequences for others elsewhere. It's partly to do with the less pleasurable by-products of affluence. I think there is a concern now with the ways in which consumerism is actually *deprivatory*; it's not only compromising the world by its negative consequences – congestion, pollution and so on – but also, there's a sense that maybe one isn't enhancing one's happiness that greatly; that other things are going missing, most obviously time expenditure, but also other various forms of sensory experience. So for me, it probably is a

case of sometimes being a ‘sopped conscience’, but there are other things lurking there, which demand a response from policy-makers and other agencies.

CB: What strikes me about this question is that it’s *true*. A lot of ethical consumption campaigning does explicitly work by appealing to people’s sense of guilt, compassion or responsibility about other people suffering. I wouldn’t want to deny that it works that way, although just how far that can go, to what extent it can promote political change, is another issue. What’s interesting is how quite a lot of this campaigning framed as ethical openly says ‘you’re embedded in all these networks, you have a certain responsibility to do things’. And I think that’s a point of a lot of tension; it works, but there’s also a point at which it turns people off. Because if you keep telling people they’re responsible for everything, after a while they feel overburdened. If I’m connected to all these networks by a set of mediated chains, that might mean I can do something; but it might also mean any little change I make will make no difference.

Similarly, these fields generate new forms of capitalism, that is true – and quite a lot of fair trade coffee and so on, is a niche market. Ethical consumers might practice various forms of social and cultural distinction, and mark themselves off by demonstrating ethical commitments. And that’s problematic, obviously. The alternative to that, and the big issue for organic and fair trade food now, is *mainstreaming*, about moving away from a niche market or privileged field. Mainstreaming, particularly in the case of organic and fair trade, has been remarkably successful over the past decade or so, and these fields are no longer straightforwardly middle-class. The Co-op supermarket, for instance, has been crucial to the fair trade story. But mainstreaming is also the point at which fair trade networks become commodified in different ways. So on the one hand you have the problem that niche markets are exclusionary if they’re just about cultural distinction; but the *success* of mainstreaming is I think the point at which the tensions between ethical consumption and anti-consumerism or anti-globalisation becomes clear.

JL: The label ‘ethical consumption’ can harbour many different types of politics.

KS: Yes - ethical consumption is often thought as green consumption, but the two aren’t necessarily the same thing. Caught up in this category of green consumption is the sense that it’s a move only certain middle-class people who are very privileged are able to make, and that it’s very *nice* for them, in enhancing their actual experience of the world but doesn’t really have any consequences. On the other hand, I think you might want to argue that things that start in niches, and are middle-class, even exclusive, do start to work in the way Clive was implying; because they become mainstream, because they spill over, they have consequences for more major shifts in production, and so on. But the story is very complicated. Take the Green and Black phenomenon, for example, where you’ve got the whole business of capitalism carrying on as usual [this organic chocolate producer has just been taken over by Cadburys] – where bits of fair trade and ethical consumption are contained within a corporate strategy.

At the same time, what one is counting as ‘consumption’ is very relevant here. One can get carried away, I think, by the idea that consumption is always purchasing commodities. Of course a great deal of consumption is mediated through the market, but it doesn’t *have* to

be, and one of the ideas that I'm interested in with the alternative hedonist project is how you don't purchase, how you actively recall purchasing power. For example, you walk rather than taking the car. Many of these forms of withholding purchasing power will not actually be very significant for others, partly because there's not very much to show for it – there aren't the obvious signs that you are, for example, into fair trade coffee or ethical consumption of a commodity-based kind.

CB: Yes, and we also might be critical about the degree to which we need to address how consumption, consumers, purchasing or being 'a consumer' are not necessarily the same thing. For instance, organisations might *look* as if they are trying to change consumers behaviour so that their aggregate impact has an effect through the market, but increasingly we're noticing that what they're really trying to do is to shift systems of collective provisioning. For example, Bristol is one of the first 'Fairtrade Cities' as certified by the Fairtrade Foundation, which involves getting cafes and schools and all sorts of other institutions to provide fair trade coffee. So the key actors, it turns out, are procurement officers, working for local authorities: not the people you think of as key to this type of politics. It also means that the decision to buy fair trade has been taken out of your hands, so if you go to Bristol Zoo and decide you want tea or coffee you now drink fair trade - this has nothing to do with your consumer choice or discretion. That's interesting because it indicates something of how large collective actors, such as local authorities and public companies, have shifted in relation to fair trade.

KS: That manifests a dialectic that I'm very interested in. On the one hand the procurement officer looks as if they are exercising some kind of dictatorship: if you won't drink fair trade coffee you won't have any coffee when you go to the zoo. On the other hand, the only reason that those officers in places like Bristol are imposing a fair trade policy is to do with consumer *pressure*. They feed off each other: there's got to be a level of consumer interest *before* the institution adopts it as policy. The other way you can see this is in congestion charges in London; before it was introduced it was arguable that there would not have been majority support for it (the situation would have been more like it was in Edinburgh, where they made the mistake of having a vote beforehand and lost it). Whereas in London there was just enough support for the congestion charge for it not to be seen as an entirely undemocratic move, and its consequences - the less noxious streets and a nicer experience of public transport - has meant that support for it has now been reinforced. So these two interact: the consumer pressure reinforces the policy-making, and the policy-making reinforces the support for consumer pressure.

CB: Similarly, ethical consumption organisations are often quite smart in that they are aware of the fact that they need to publicly demonstrate that the market is changing. The Ethical Purchasing Index, which the Co-op and the New Economics Foundation produce every year, is a good example, as every year they say 'more people are buying ethically' but they also usually say that 'more people would like to but can't'. They're appealing to policy-makers, but also to *business*: to say, look – there's an opportunity here. So the real force isn't really the market force at all, it's being *able to show* that the market might have changed.

JL: How would you respond to the continued accusation made towards people who work in this area that what really needs to be focused on is not consumption, but production?

KS: I think the focus on production is right, in that ultimately we do need to have changes at that level: to move to a zero-waste methods of creating goods, a much less profit-oriented, more socially regulated and democratically managed economy, and to shift the focus towards a more sustainable and secure global order. However, if we're thinking today about what would actually start *generating* those changes, then the continued emphasis on the workplace and the level of production appears somewhat misplaced. I know that this is somewhat difficult for some Marxists to take on, but the idea of prosperity and the universal subject of humanity needs to be re-thought; the only place we can begin to sense some potential is of more of a trans-class kind, and one such area is through consumption.

So my argument is yes, of course we have to have changes in production, but we've also got to think about how we might *begin* that process of change, where the political force for that might begin to emerge. I do think that consumption is beginning to be potentially a political act in the way that it's not been before, partly because of the way people are beginning to feel they're part of the fabric of things. And where else are we to look? And particularly, where else are we to look in a democratic, industrial society, where we're not talking about radical changes that allow production to form some position of dictatorship over needs? We can't think about how agents of transformation might be emerging in our culture today, unless we do that in terms of appealing to the shifts in sensibility of what people are feeling and think about how those then translate into various forms of political pressure, which might link up with social movement politics, in a party political system. So that's why I got interested in this subject, of consumption as a political lever or route of transmission for those sort of changes.

CB: It's about identifying agents of change, isn't it? The objective with most consumerist campaigns is about changing the ways systems of production work, such as addressing sweatshop conditions, or shifting to organic farming. We focus on how, as consumers, people are being *enrolled* into other things; that consuming is both a potential form of agency, and a surface of mobilisation as well. As you're saying, a reason why this is a crucial type of investigation is because if big structural changes are to work, they have to fit with people's structure of feeling, with where people are *at*. If I were surrounded by a bunch of old-fashioned Marxists who asked that question, then one of the things I'd be inclined to start talking about is social reproduction: that consumption is about expressing identity, the reproduction of labour power, and practices which are, importantly, gendered.

JL: In this context it's interesting how, in Britain, political interest in consumption is most usually associated with the right. Whereas that's not necessarily the case everywhere: in Sweden and France, for example, where the left has had a very strong tradition of being engaged in issues around consumption much more, it's not necessarily seen as an abdication of social democracy, but rather a way of building it up.

CB: And they actually just call it 'political consumerism' in Sweden, don't they; so yes, I think you're quite right. There are some aspects of those sorts of traditions in the UK, and

in the US, consumer politics might be classically much more to the left, with Naderism, for example.

KS: Yes there's Naderism there and campaigns and boycotts of various kinds. It's difficult to know exactly where you locate such practices on the left-right spectrum. Because on the one hand you could say that quite a lot of such early consumption activity was basically about individual needs, by altering production prices, for example; and such boycotts, and Nader's campaigns, have often been considered *not* to be of the left, because their goal is not very radical, and can be consistent with the remuneration of market society. On the other hand, they're clearly taking on the big corporate producers of the world, as well, so quite where it slots into that traditional left-right spectrum is a complex issue.

CB: The burgeoning of this field might force us to think about what left politics can't do any more and to think about this is to take seriously the question of democratic legitimacy

KS: Yes, exactly, that's the key reason why we need to pay attention to consumption. The left needs to rethink its whole project, and the role of consumption within that.

JL: That's interesting in terms of the cultural studies/New Left re-evaluation of the importance of consumption, as often these movements – around ethical, green and anti-consumerism - don't seem to fit very easily with such templates. For instance, academically, I was predominantly taught about the importance of re-evaluating consumption in terms of gendered agency and empowerment, and it's not always very easy to map those paradigms onto the fact that these anti-globalisation activists etc *are* interested in consumption, and at the same time interested in what we might call 'defetishising' consumption and pointing out the exploitation within commodity chains.

CB: Yes, I think it's precisely that: we want to find a way of being critical, of not simply celebrating this, and we're being forced to rethink how we might do it. So actually, in a sense, we're playing catch-up, as Jo was saying; we're trying to find new vocabularies to explain this, to find new perspectives which don't fall back into problematic dismissal.

KS: And indeed we are constructing our own politics through that.

JL: Why did you decide to work on this subject, and how does it relate to your other interests, your context or background?

CB: My interest in the area is partly a concern about part of that is in terms of how 'being ethical' or 'being good' might be being constructed. Not necessarily in terms of performing something which might be superficial, but in terms of the strong imperative to assume people can be transparent about their commitments. Maybe it's just because I'm the kind of person who doesn't really like to talk about those sort of things, but I also think that's not straightforwardly the only form being ethical can be. There are all sorts of reasons why people shouldn't be expected to be able to give an account of themselves, for instance. But again, it's one of the key interests of our project to try to think critically about how 'the ethical' is being constructed, in and through this field, and particularly the idea that it exists as something as you *consume*.

I'm not going to directly answer this question, but I'm going to make a connection with my research in South Africa. One of the interesting experiential issues in South Africa since democracy is just how vibrant the commercial culture is. Obviously this has been going on for a long time, as black South African political culture is embedded in all sorts of commercial networks. The South Africa context has made me think about the degree to which, particularly in new democracies, what democracy means to many is simply the ability to consume, to buy; and if we remember, Eastern Europe used to be thought of as 'bad' for not being able to do that. So campaigns which tell people to consume less, or to consumer differently, for their lived experience may be one where their political freedom, their liberty, is embedded in actually being *able* to consume, and by which they connect to global networks.

KS: For a very long time I have been interested in questions relating to need and the notion that consumer needs are like desires. I got involved in a scholarly way with that in the early 1970s, when I first seriously read Marx. What interested me particularly about Marxism was the absence of the theory of needs: in other words, the interesting conjunction in Marx of two perspectives: one, which was emphasising cultural relativity, a position which tends to see needs manifest in actual consumption; and secondly, the other position, sees needs in a more essentialist kind of way. At the same time, what's interesting in Marx is how the issue of true need keeps coming in as well, in the form of the theory of alienation, or the critique of capitalist consumption as distorting and manipulating needs, which became carried forward into the Frankfurt School and critical theory.² Well, I've always been interested in that tension, in how to think it through in terms of what it means for concepts of fulfilment and self-realisation and the 'good life'. I think we need to get away from thinking of, on the one hand, consumers as entirely sovereign individuals, and from those difficult theoretical positions which are claiming in some ways that freedom is fulfilling yourself as an autonomous kind of consumer. On the other hand, we also need to get away from discourses which are talking to us about 'dupes', a manipulated precipitant of more transcendent social forces that are structuring and creating desire. We need to think in a much more dialectical way, which recognises that, yes, there are consumer responses that are partly to do with the existing social context, but also that there is an element of relative autonomy, there's a space for reflexivity there, that consumers aren't just sort of patterns, but are actively thinking about consumption as well.

At the same time, and from very early on, I was very green. I was very strongly influenced by the whole movement to green the socialist position, the red-green development on the left. And thinking through the necessity of engaging with these questions of 'true needs' comes under the constraints of existing ecological pressures, but is also an area where there is a certain flexibility, where people actually can start re-thinking what it is they 'truly need' or what is 'the good life', even though they are doing so in relation to existing discourses and formative influences of various kinds.

JL: So that question of individual and social needs is still one that you think needs to be asked in a different context now?

KS: Yes. I've been loath to think in terms of the true/false needs distinction, while recognising that it's very difficult to entirely dispense with it. I'm more inclined to emphasise how, through shifting structures of feeling, people come to revise their conceptions of what it is that they need or want, which are continually changing and transforming developments. For example, it seems to me to be a mistake to suggest that there are some set of essentially natural needs for well-being, which we've just got to get straight about in order to harmonise our lives with what nature delivers. That whole perspective on the naturalness of needs is one I don't have a great deal of sympathy for. But I also in a way don't think that one can readily talk about people really having needs for things like air flight or fast transport, which are in some sense false needs, because they are ecologically problematic.

CB: Debates about consumption at the moment precisely raise all those big normative questions, not so much what should we *do*, but rather where and how should we *be*, how should we get on with other people. As part of this, we're been forced to think much more seriously about what sorts of evaluations we make as academics about 'ordinary' people's practices. For example, Bristol, where I live, is an incredibly divided city. There are certain parts of the city where if you walk down the street, you can't *not* be an ethical consumer: if you go into these shops you have to buy organic meat or fair trade coffee. Five minutes down the road is one of the most deprived wards in the country, where in focus group people say to us, 'we don't buy fair trade coffee because that's what heroin addicts steal'. So the entire model of what fair trade is about in certain parts of Bristol is different from others. This returns us to the question of why people get hooked into these networks. One set of issues might be the sort of people they are; and as a geographer, I will say it also might actually depend on where you *live*. And I think that the issue of whether it's about choice, discretion and changing your identity, or whether it's more *limited*, is one of the most interesting things about it.

JL: Both of you have written about the importance of not only attending to the issue of 'altruism' in green, ethical and anti-consumerism, but also paying attention to hedonism, status games, and self-interest. Can you say something about why you do this?

CB: There's a shift going on as the idea that you just give people a lot of information and they'll change their conduct is slowly being thrown out of the window, as that's not what happens. People aren't unethical and they don't need to be changed into being ethical. The assumption that you can change people simply into other-regarding subjects who are disinterested a) isn't practically likely to happen, and yet it's an assumption which is embedded in a lot of campaigns, and b) you wouldn't want people to be purely self-disinterested; you couldn't be a properly ethical subject if you had no concern for your sense of who you are. The campaigns that are successful work because they engage with people's ordinary concerns about their own lives and interests, and then very successfully connect them to other people's situations. The normative questions that throws up for me there are how academics often tend not to 'get' how people work, and I think that's what at stake here – we have some responsibility to think about how ordinary people are. And ordinary people are compassionate, and sympathetic, and generous, and self-interested, and concerned with their families.

KS: I think people are complex individuals and have both selfish and unselfish motives. I'm interested in hedonism because of its role in reinforcing altruistic motivations in ethical consumption. At the same time, implicit in what Clive is saying is the issue that we can't draw too hard and fast distinctions between altruism and egoism, or at any rate, we should see that altruistic motives can include an element of self-interest and vice-versa. People who chose to go by bike, for example, rather than car do so in part because of the personal pleasures they have – it enhances their own personal pleasure – but at the same time they are also concerned with the impact of collective success – if more people go by bike, then the pleasures of biking will be enhanced, but also it will be more possible for more bikers to be on the road. And they take pleasure in the pleasures of others: part of being a self-interested individual is finding pleasures in what pleasures others are finding. So there's a whole set of overlaps here we need to take account of. Self-distinction is an issue, but there also seem to me to be other modes of altruism and egoism that are less clear-cut. Much more complex forms of self-individualism are being exhibited than the subject of neoclassical economics allows. And I've also suggested that you can see here the emergence of a certain republican dimension to consumption, where you have consumers actually thinking about the impact of personal consumption more collectively.

CB: One of the key reasons why what you've just talked about is important is that some left politics can tend to have a particular set of ideas over what a good person is and should be. There's a weird sort of mirroring between the neoclassical model - consumers should be rational and self-interested – and New Labour discourse, which tends to either assume that people are like that, or becoming more like that. And you actually think, well, not only should people *not* be like that, but nor have they ever been. Too much leftist critique simply *accepts* that neoliberalism has transformed people's selves, subjectivities, positions and practices. But in some of the work we've done, not only do people *not* tend to talk about themselves as consumers, but what they're talking about is packed lunches for their kids, where to go on holiday, all sorts of ordinary concerns which are not only not self-interested but are intensely *social*. Between that highly normative 'people should be self-interested, rational consumers' and the 'oh dear – they are (but they shouldn't be)' - which is the classic leftist position - are many connections and variations.

KS: I think the question here is of agency. One issue that has emerged is the *mistake* of the very rigid divide between the consumer and the citizen – the idea that if you've got any kind of republican interest, you're somehow a bad consumer. And the whole dominance of that position on the consumer has been so influential, I think, that even those who are critical of it reproduce the divide. Even where the expansion of ethical consumption is acknowledged, somehow these people aren't really seen as active consumers – 'don't model consumption on them', if you like. I suppose that bears also on how we develop a critique of the shallow appeal to the way new Labour are trying to position us as *consumers* of public services rather than users of them, and emphasising choice. How it is we develop a critique of that; do we say these people are being treated as consumers inappropriately? We need to develop a less ignorant form of consumer culture.

JL Yes that's a key issue - New Labour have over-estimated the importance of 'being a consumer' and a lot of reactions against the government are precisely because people don't want to be interpellated as consumers in every single context.

CB: Yes, no one wants to consume crime! Care proposals for offenders and victims just don't work along the model of the consumer, for example. The assumption is that being a consumer is the most important thing about their identities.

KS: There is scepticism about the notion of the consumer, about the notion of choice. People are being offered 'choice' when they simply want a decent hospital.

JL: So, do you think that what we/you're saying is that progressive politics has to think about both citizens and consumers in various different combinations or constellations?

CB: This *is* progressive politics anyway: we know that. If you want to describe the field of progressive politics today, then you're talking about things like fair trade politics: it's not *everything* to talk about, but it's a key part of such movements. I think these organisations and campaigns in this field might also actually be transforming how politics is done. It might be to do with neither being a citizen nor a consumer; and a lot of it is to do with 'inventing citizenship'. Make Poverty History is an obvious example: this is a movement embedded in things like Traidcraft, and lots of other faith-based organisations. So there's a whole set of translations going on between ordinary, everyday practices – what coffee you buy, where you get your mortgage from – to listing people as supporters to go on big campaigns. Now, that's not the only version of politics there is, and we could be critical of that in all sorts of ways, but that's clearly a political practice, and that's our starting point.

KS: I'm concerned to acknowledge the suggestion that consumers should be theorised as either preponderantly sovereign beings versus a view of consumers which the kind that we've had sometimes on the left which is that they're being manipulated, or indeed, the postmodern argument that these are consumer-citizens are using consumption to signal identity in a very sort of superficial, narcissistic way. I think all those particular models of the consumer could do with being challenged; we need to recognise the complexity of the consumer as someone who is actually much more reflective; we need to recognise that consumption is often an area where people are thinking about the *impact* of consumption in a more republican way. So I'd be suggesting that the divide between citizen and consumer needs to be rethought in the light of these emerging forms of reflexivity.

CB: A different way of saying the same thing is to go back to the language of agency. Increasingly, in certain fields, people feel that they can actually contribute to broader collective projects to do with consuming. There's no evidence that people who are ethical consumers, for example, don't vote and don't join political parties, so it is not a substitute.

KS: Yes I think we've had the sense that somehow the area of consumption is where politics happens for a long time. And that needs challenging. Having said that, I'm not particularly optimistic that this will prove to be the spearhead of a process of radical transformation. I'm not terribly hopeful. But I think that these levers of change have possibilities in that they could set off a relay of pressures.

JL: What further connections, articulations or linkages do you think need to be made from and to these areas?

KS: Individual consumption will remain relatively ineffective as a lever of change unless it is complimented by policy-making. And that policy-making can draw some of its legitimacy from consumer greenness, to mandate policy, and set off a process whereby the policy changes the structures of feeling and experience and more people come to support the policies that are introduced. But you need to have that two-way interaction.

CB: I'm interested in the connections that are already being made. All Marks & Spencer recipes have gone fair trade, for example, and that's a good example of how there's a lot of politics, which is *able* to go on 'behind the scenes' because a claim can be made to this broader group of consumers. Such actors are trying to change policy in its broadest sense, not just national government policy, but Marks & Spencer's procurement policy too. That's where the challenge lies, in embedding ordinary, everyday consumption practices into networks of institutional change. Our emphasis is on tracking and describing what style of politics this is, as that shapes what judgements you make of it. For instance, if we simply think that all this is trying to change the world by aggregate market function, then we're going to find that's not happening, and then we're going to say that's not valuable; but few actually think that's going to happen. To describe what's happening is halfway to getting to the point where we can say what's progressive or not, how we change what we think 'progressive politics' might be.³

KS: Consumption may be emerging here as an area of politicisation for individuals, which can work as a point of pressure for change, and it would be good to see that being connected to social movement politics. One of the reasons why the movement against genetically modified foods has been successful is because there was a link-up or an articulation between social movement campaigns and consumer agency. Maybe we need to be thinking in terms of how those connections can be cemented; how we can open up more channels between the set of more conventional social movement-type pressures, which are clearly very important in providing information to the general consuming public. I'm not sure how that articulation gets made, but it is one I think will have some importance in the future.

CB: Some of these organisations and campaigns are already connected into such networks. The *Ethical Consumer* magazine will talk about how their main aim is to raise awareness, so they relate to those networks, and their politics are more consumerist. Again, it's not mutually exclusive, but there are various sorts of connections. There are also clearly limits to this too as most of the examples we have talked about tend to be about food: and this is a point Jo you make in your paper about *No Logo*, that this politics does depend on the things people do have discretion and power as consumers over; and that there's a whole set of questions about certain sorts of commodities or commodity chains where consumer power or retailing hasn't been made an issue.⁴

KS: Yes that's exactly what I was raising. For example, I would say, we don't need to spend so much on armaments and that our collective health could be better if we spent less on military production.

CB: That's a great example because you might ask how people might get inducted to particular networks from getting involved in fair trade; might they then join Amnesty or get involved in questions of military exploitation, perhaps? This goes back to the question of how these organisations and networks and movements actually engage with one another. The job many of them do is to broker information, supporters or members across each other. Make Poverty History is a classic example of this – there are hundreds of organisations embedded in it, and they all frame their involvement in different ways.

Bristol is one of our key case studies and it has two big employers: the Ministry of Defence's procurement department and Rolls Royce. This raises all sorts of interesting questions; for example many of the people we interviewed about ethical consumption or their partners work for the Ministry of Defence, so does that mean they're hypocrites when they engage in ethical consumption? It doesn't, actually, but it raises all sorts of interesting questions about the limits of what counts as ethical, and instead of seeing such people as hypocrites we should be asking what it is that gets people *through* life, and how would we give them the opportunity to do things differently.

KS: The bigger political question here is: how would you move to a society that hadn't such an investment in the arms industry?

CB: Well, all the fair trade coffee shops in Bristol would go out the window, as there'd be no Ministry of Defence employees there!

KS: We're coming back to the question of *leverage* here. The question seems to be: what are the relays that could begin to shift these patterns in a much more radical way?

CB: Yes, that actually seems to be the issue here: identifying agents of change.

References

1. Both projects are part of the AHRB/ESRC funded *Cultures of Consumption* project. See <http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk>
2. These ideas became published in a book: Kate Soper, *On Human Needs: Open and Closed Theories in a Marxist perspective*, Harvester, Brighton, 1981.
3. See Clive Barnett, *Culture and Democracy: Media, Space and Representation*. Edinburgh University Press, 2003.
4. Jo Littler, 'Beyond the Boycott: anti-consumerism, cultural change and the limits of reflexivity', *Cultural Studies*, Vol.19, No. 2, March 2005 pp. 227-252