

# Whatever Happened to Ethical Consumption

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‘Consuming ethics: articulating the subjects and spaces of ethical consumption’ (Barnett *et al* 2005) outlines a conceptual framework for further inquiry, developed at the start of a research project funded as part of the ESRC/AHRC *Cultures of Consumption* Programme, involving Clive Barnett, Paul Cloke, Nick Clarke and Alice Malpass.<sup>1</sup> In the course of undertaking empirical research (between 2003 and 2006), and also through the conversations with other researchers facilitated by the Programme, we subsequently refined our own thinking about ethical consumption. The argument presented in the book-length account of our project, *Globalizing Responsibility* (Barnett *et al* 2010) is significantly refined when compared to the ‘Consuming Ethics’ paper. In order to situate both the argument in that first paper, and also the refinement to the conceptual framework over the course of the project, it’s useful to outline how ethical consumption was approached in existing research when our project got underway. Existing paradigms of critical analysis shared certain assumptions. For sceptics, the growth of ethical consumption was often presented as an essentially middle class activity that substituted for, perhaps even undermined, more collective forms of solidarity and public action. And it was also often suggested that this form of activity was a way in which people were able to salve their consciences without making any fundamental commitments. In more positive accounts, often arising from fields of environment justice research, sustainability, and food studies, a stronger sense of ethical consumption as part of emergent forms of social movements could be found. But here too, there was a strong assumption that political mobilisation works through getting individuals to recognise that their moral implication in spatially extensive networks of production, distribution and exchange is mediated by their consumer choices. Analyses of ethical consumption therefore often tended to be at least implicitly consequentialist in their understandings of ethical action – they tended to assume that the burden of responsible individual and collective action depends on people being able to *know* the likely consequences of their actions, as well as having the practical competency to adjust their actions accordingly (see

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<sup>1</sup> This programme ran from 2002 to 2007 ([see http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk/](http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk/))

Barnett, Cafaro and Newholm 2005). In turn, critical analysis tended to hinge on demonstrations that either the acclaimed effects of ethical consumption did not hold up, or that self-identifying ethical consumers were hypocrites for not acting in a consistently 'ethical' fashion across all aspects of their lives.

In the mid-2000s, at the time we began our research on ethical consumption practices in and around Bristol, this set of assumptions sat comfortably within a broader paradigm for the critical analysis of 'neoliberalism'. In this paradigm, a touch of Marxist state theory sprinkled with a dash of ideas of 'power/knowledge' and 'governmentality' derived from Michel Foucault to bolster a functionalist narrative in which it was presumed that any shift from public to private provision of all sorts of goods and services necessarily went hand in hand with a series of concerted efforts to construct so-called "neoliberal subjects". The growth of ethical consumption activities was easily presented as the exemplary case of neoliberalization, in which markets were identified as both the objects and the mediums for action that might look like it had political content but was fundamentally privatized in form and content. It was this rapidly crystallizing theoretical orthodoxy that 'Consuming ethics' sought to interrupt, and over the course of our project as a whole our animating concern was to complicate the taken-for-granted terms of critical analysis to which ethical consumption was subjected.

In this light, 'Consuming ethics' proposed a two-pronged framework for the analysis of ethical consumption. We suggested, first, that there was an organisational dimension, in which campaigning organisations, policy makers, and businesses sought to facilitate the adoption of ethical consumption practices by consumers. We called this the dimension of "governing consumption", and suggested that there was a wide array of devices that sought to transform ethical *oughts* into practical *cans* – devices as seemingly banal as food recycling bins to donation by direct debit. And second, we proposed that there was a dimension we dubbed "governing the consuming self", by which we meant the forms of self-hood that ethical consumption practices enabled people to cultivate in their everyday lives. Importantly, we emphasised that this dimension was an inter-subjective process, not simply a matter of isolated subjects being confronted with top-down 'discourses'. Making up one's own ethical subjectivity, we presumed, was something that individuals did in the company of other people, such as kids and friends and colleagues at work, or fellow members of clubs and churches, or with their neighbours.

Our focus was on understanding the articulation of these two dimensions – we assumed that this needed to be examined and accounted for, not simply assumed in advance. As we developed our thinking in the course of putting this framework into practice, revising and adjusting it in

relation to the difficulties and discoveries of empirical inquiry, we became increasingly assertive about questioning the forms of agency involved in the development and growth of fair trade practices, sustainability initiatives, and alternative food networks. The argument we settled on, in no small part in response to the things we found out about how ethical consumption campaigns were actually conceived and implemented as well as how people reacted to injunctions to be “more responsible” as consumers, was that ethical consumption was not best thought of as an effect of consumer agency at all. It was driven by strategic interventions by NGOs, businesses, different parts of both national and local government, and it involved people finding new avenues for pursuing commitments, interests and values that they most often already had.

As our project developed, we became a lot more suspicious of the utility of concepts of ‘governmentality’ and ‘subject-formation’ that we originally used to present our thoughts in ‘Consuming ethics’. By the time we wrote *Globalizing Responsibility*, we had settled on the theme of problematization (see Barnett, Clarke and Cloke 2013), a minor theme in Foucault’s later work (see Barnett 2016). The idea of problematization directs our attention to the ways in which organisations, campaigns, companies, and people seek to manage and respond to the difficulties that arise in pursuing their particular goals and interests. It is an idea that helped us to capture the sense we had picked up that ‘top down’ strategic interventions around consumption were not strongly determinative of people’s conduct, but sought to bring into the open certain questions and possibilities for new courses of action. And in appealing to Foucault’s notion of “ethical problematization”, we sought to acknowledge the multiplicity of ways in which people reflect on their own conduct in relation to publicly circulating invitations to be responsible consumers. Along the way, we also adopted a more robust conceptualization of consumption derived from the field of practice theory, in no small part because of the influence of the broader *Cultures of Consumption* programme in shaping our own project. Thinking of consumption as something embedded in practices, rather than as a separate field all of its own (often conflated with ‘shopping’), allowed us to further specify the difficulties faced by both strategic actors and ordinary people in transforming routine activities into explicit fields of ethical and political mobilization.

It is worth underscoring the point that the original paper, ‘Consuming ethics’, and the final argument presented in *Globalizing Responsibility*, while unashamedly “theoretical” in tenor, were both concerned with developing conceptual frameworks with which to pursue further inquiry, and not ethical consumption but more broadly into processes of mobilisation, participation, and transformations of public life (see Clarke 2008). It’s worth, then, saying what we found out in the

course of the empirical work, which involved a range of case studies, using a variety of qualitative methodologies from interviews, focus groups, documentary analysis to participatory action research. Two key themes emerged from the empirical work we undertook. First, we found that ethical consumption goes on everywhere. It goes on in middle class neighbourhoods served by trendy “shabby chic” ethical high streets, and it goes on in relatively deprived social areas where the main retail outlets, perhaps the only one, is the Co-op. Secondly, we found that ethical consumption is an extension of political concerns into the ordinary spaces of everyday life – into the home, schools, and workplaces. This is how our informants talked about buying organic food or choosing fair trade coffee, but it is also how campaign organisations conceptualised the opportunities that consumer-oriented activism afforded them for mobilising support for specific issues. This was true, for example, of how members of faith groups described their commitments to global trade justice campaigns, as an extension of commitments already enacted through membership of local church groups; it was true, too, of how campaigns to promote fairtrade consumption had become focussed on transforming the procurement practices of local authorities, regional business, and significant public organisations. On the basis of these sorts of findings, we ended up making two strong theoretical claims. First, being an “ethical consumer” is not really an individualistic pursuit at all. It is embedded in all sorts of social networks. It is as members of church groups, or trade unions, or post-natal coffee groups that people learn about and put into practice various decisions about what, how and where to buy environmentally friendly, ethically sourced, organically grown, fairly traded goods and services. And moreover, these sorts of activities are often linked to broader forms of collective campaigning. The people who sell and buy fairtrade goods at the back of the church on Sundays are the same people who participated in Make Poverty History campaigns or lobbied their MPs about pieces of legislation. Second, we kept insisting that there is more to ethical consumption than shopping. The reason we were attracted to practice theory, in fact, was because we found that the campaigns and organisations we were doing research on (and with) had begun to shift their own conceptualizations of consumption and consumers very much in this direction as well. We found that there was a great deal of campaigning going on which sought to transform collective infrastructures of consumption, not least through changing procurement policies for major organisations and companies. The successful campaign to make Bristol into a Fairtrade City, which aimed to change whole systems of urban provisioning, was one example of this sort of shift that we analysed in detail.

What we concluded from all this was that if ethical shopping is not necessarily individualistic, and if there is more to ethical consumption than shopping, then it might be a good idea to recognise that this whole field might involve rather more than the simple image of consumers exercising their preferences in the market place. Few of the people we talked to who thought of themselves as “ethical consumers” were naïve enough to suppose that global systems of trade would be transformed just through consumer pressure. It was for most of them a way of raising awareness, of aligning their own commitments with the routines of everyday life, and of demonstrating to others that everyone could make a little difference. Likewise, the organisations and businesses that provide innovative pathways for people to consume more responsibly do not generally think of themselves as turning “unethical” consumers into ethical consumers, but rather as providing outlets for people’s existing energies and commitments. They saw ethical consumption campaigning as just one route to mobilising support for broader efforts of lobbying and campaigning, or of building alternative systems of production, distribution and exchange. In short, rather than a narrowly individualistic affair, a retreat from real politics, or mere consumerism with a good conscience, we ended up by thinking that ethical consumption should be best thought of as involving a range of local practices of global solidarity that combine imperatives of both *justice* and *care*.

None of us came to this project because we were primarily interested in ethical consumption per se, but because this was a topic that served as an entry point for various enduring intellectual and personal commitments. We approached ethical consumption from the direction of issues that, since working together, we have each continued to pursue in relation to other substantive themes: for example, Paul Cloke’s on-going work on the organisational spaces of faith-based ethical action and political campaigning; Nick Clarke’s research on the changing practices of political engagement; Alice Malpass’ research on embodied practices of well-being; Clive Barnett’s work on emergent forms of public action. And in acknowledging our own pathways through and beyond research on ethical consumption, we want to underscore the potential that the *Journal of Consumer Ethics* has for engaging across a whole series of debates in social science, the humanities, policy-making and nongovernmental politics. We will close by indicating four “big” issues for social science and social theory to which the research communities addressed by this new journal might usefully contribute. First, further research is needed into how discourses of “the consumer”, “choice”, and “responsibility” enable different actors (civil society as well as state and corporate) to speak for “the popular”. Here, research on ethical consumption has potential to contribute to wider debates on the emergence of new forms of “the political” in a seemingly anti-

political age. Second, further research is needed into the forms of mobilization, collectivization, and coalition building that are emerging across the diverse fields of contemporary consumption-focused activism. In particular, the degree to which recourse to consumer repertoires of activism, membership, and representation marks a shift in organizational form towards advocacy-based campaigning requires further investigation. Third, further research is required on the ways in which people engage with the multiple demands for them to act responsibly in relation to various global crises. In particular, research is required that focuses on how the capacity of citizens to engage with contemporary problematizations of personal and political responsibility is differentiated by their command of material resources, but also by the cultural capital that enables them to 'answer back' to demands to be 'ethical' and 'act responsibly', as well as the forms of associational culture to which they belong and which shapes capacities to transform embedded practices. Not least, this research will require further attention to the gendering of ethical consumption campaigns and the gendered social relations through which the forms of public action articulated through ethical consumption are embedded in everyday contexts. And finally, given the degree to which ethical consumption campaigning is often aimed at, and most effective in, transforming infrastructures and practices of collective provision, further research is required into the practical opportunities and legitimacy problems associated with attempts to change people's behaviour without them knowing it (see Barnett 2010).

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