

Gender and Ethical Consumption: Lessons from the EDGE

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Abstract

EDGE (Economic Dividends for Gender Equality) is a relatively new certification that stands out for its explicit reference to gender-related injustices. It has the potential to significantly expand the ethical consumer agenda, not least by juxtaposing questions of gender recognition to more traditional consumer preoccupations with health (e.g. GMO and non-GMO certifications), environmental preservation (e.g. various organic labels) and trading relationships with the Third World (e.g. Fair Trade). Gender-related struggles, however, remain a structural, not an individual, affair and any attempt to responsabilise the consumer should be viewed with suspicion in the current neoliberal milieu. At stake is the inability of EDGE-style initiatives to engage with the more radical and transformative interventions that are urgently needed in combating gender inequality.

Keywords: EDGE; ethical consumer; gender politics; feminism; neoliberalism

Introduction

A large bulk of consumer studies has documented consumer enthusiasm but also confusion and frustration with the ever-expanding list of labels that implicate their everyday purchasing and non-purchasing choices in certain forms of social and environmental justice. Amidst the current plethora of labels, the “EDGE” certification, an abbreviation for Economic Dividends for Gender Equality, stands out for its explicit reference to gender-related injustices. Through this new certification, first launched at the World Economic Forum in 2011: “a clear picture emerges of a company’s commitment as measured in terms of equal pay for equivalent work, recruitment and promotion, leadership development training & mentoring, flexible working and the company culture.” (<http://www.edge-cert.org/our-impact/how-edge-creates-change-2/>). Such a clear picture is said to have already emerged on the working floors of IKEA, L’Oreal, Deloitte and INSEAD University. Meanwhile the scheme has been enthusiastically supported by powerful figures such as Hilary Clinton (during her speech at Professional Business Women California Conference), calling it an “exciting initiative” that “help companies measure and hold themselves accountable for creating a more equal workplace” (Abramson, 2017).

To be sure, narrowing the gender pay gap is a critical aim and EDGE is not alone in this ongoing feminist struggle. However, EDGE is rather unique in foregrounding the (ethical) consumer as a key agent in the struggle for gender equality in the workplace (Tulshyan, 2014). By proposing a distinct and recognisable label, male and female consumers alike are

indirectly invited to reward those companies that have ostensibly achieved transparency in their gender policies and punish those that have not through their ultimate form of self-expression: purchasing and non-purchasing choices. In this paper, I argue that there is a positive side to this initiative but also a negative one. Let me begin with the positive one.

Recognising Gender as an Ethical Issue

Ethical consumers are broadly viewed as having “political, religious, spiritual, environmental, social or other motives” in being “concerned with the effects that a purchasing choice has, not only on themselves, but also on the external world around them.” (Harrison, Newholm and Shaw, 2005: p.2). Although such definitions remain common across different theoretical treatments and disciplines (Chatzidakis, Carrington and Shaw, 2016), the role of gender inequality as a distinct ethical issue that may inform consumer choices remains conspicuously absent in the academic literature. By and large, explorations of gender either view it as a “background variable” affecting ethical choices (along with other demographic characteristics such as race and age) or, more recently, as a distinct – more “feminine” – mode of ethical reasoning that is based on notions of care and caring, as opposed to abstract principles of moral justice (e.g. Pereira Heath *et al.*, 2016; Shaw, McMaster and Newholm, 2016).

The EDGE certification challenges such understandings by counter-posing, in practice, gender equality as a distinct consumer choice alongside - and often in opposition to - more traditional ethical consumer preoccupations pertaining, for instance, to health (e.g. GMO and non-GMO certifications), environmental preservation (e.g. various organic labels) and trading relationships with the Third World (e.g. Fair Trade). What are consumers supposed to choose when faced with products that are Fair Trade but not EDGE-certified? Or perhaps are EDGE-certified but not free of animal testing?

Beyond such dilemmas, EDGE is appropriate in re-asserting gender equality as an “ethical consumer issue”. At the very least, this would be in line with decades of feminist struggles highlighting that the demand for “recognition” – exemplified in so-called identity-based politics and new social movements (see e.g. Fowler, 2009; Webb, 2010) – is as pertinent and as valid as the struggle for “redistribution”, aka the fair and equitable distribution of economic (and environmental) resources (Fraser, 1997). Gender-based equality and recognition are pivotal, as Judith Butler (2005) puts it, in “constructing the intelligibility of the subject” (p. 30). In Ples and Maak’s words (2004: p.131), recognition should be the central principle in any theory of business (and consumer) ethics:

“We want our loved ones to love us, our friends and colleagues to recognize us for what we are and what we do, our employer to honour our achievements and our governments and fellow citizens to respect us and our rights as free and equal citizens”.

For Butler, such forms of recognition are fundamentally intertwined with questions of economic redistribution; to see them as separate serves the interests of capital (see Butler, 1997).

Notwithstanding, the current consumer ethics literature is preoccupied with questions of social and environmental justice – for example, trading relations with the Third World and minimisation of environmental harm. Although gender-based discrimination is often subsumed under broader boycott calls and product/service ratings (including those by ethicalconsumer.org), it is fair to say that contemporary ethical consumer activism has so far been primarily focused on struggles for the re-distribution of economic and environmental resources rather than struggles that combine recognition

politics with redistribution. EDGE reminds us that to experience gender-based discrimination in the workplace, or any other kind of identity-based discrimination, is an ethical issue of outmost significance.

Commoditising Gender, Neoliberalising the Consumer

To recognise gender-based oppression as an ethical issue, however, is different from contemplating and putting into practice the best strategies and tactics in ameliorating it. As the interview with Pauline Maclaran, Catherine Rottenberg and Lynne Segal (this issue) illustrates, feminist (and queer) activism always had a rather contentious and complicated relationship with the marketplace. And this relationship has become even more complex. EDGE is prominent but certainly not alone in the ever-expanding list of initiatives that make corporate and market-mediated appeals to sisterhood and gender-related solidarity: from “feminist knickers” (endorsing Who Made Your Pants company) to empowering sneakers (Adidas’s “All for #MyGirls” campaign) and into gender-neutral children’s books (Let Books Be Books). Common amongst these is the infusion of neoliberal tropes of entrepreneurship and (consumer) choice at the very heart of (some) contemporary feminist logics and practices. As Pauline Maclaran (see Maclaran *et al.*, in this issue) puts it, this is the era of “moral economies” or “moralised brandscapes” that co-opt feminist resistance and turn it into marketable commodities. For its critics, this is hugely problematic, not least because it obfuscates the institutional and structural factors that perpetuate various gender-related injustices in the first place (e.g. McRobbie, 2009; Oksala, 2011; Fraser, 2013). Accordingly, it hardly matters if the same consumers who are unable to afford EDGE-certified products (or “feminist knickers”, gender-neutral shoes and so on) are the same ones who experience gender-related discrimination in their own workplace (and beyond). Progressive gender activism should concern itself with the rights of all workers regardless of gender, race, age, and disability – and it should certainly be independent of their purchasing power.

The archetypal supporter of EDGE is, in many ways, Catherine Rottenberg’s neoliberal feminist: someone who is continuously “mobilized to convert continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair” (Rottenberg, 2014: p.420). Importantly, they do so not only by embracing entrepreneurialism and accepting full responsibility for their life-work balance, as Rottenberg explains, but also through actively producing and displaying their reputational and moral value in the marketplace (cf Alvedsonn, 2013; Zwick, 2013). Put differently, neoliberal consumer-citizens become bits of “human capital” (Brown, 2015) by being productive both in their workplace and their consumptionscapes. Meanwhile, what is entirely disavowed is any form of more collective action or genuine participation in what is often now called the commons. The rationality at work here, approximates what Steve Miles (2010) defines as complicit communality, “a process which implies a connection with the public realm and yet establishes that connection through individual engagement so that the communal experience is with the ideology of consumption as opposed to with any kind of a discernible complicit” (p.177). Mimicking corporations, individual consumer-citizens become invested in displaying a more humane and caring image, one that responds to public sensibilities but only through the comfort provided in the reassuringly atomized realm of everyday shopping. By implication, caring logics and practices consistently fail to translate into more collectivist and politically radical modes of action (cf Miller, 1998).

Lessons Learned?

The wider literature on the ethics and politics of consumption has long highlighted the inherent tensions and contradictions in attempting to address questions of social and environmental justice through the market. Put briefly, the increased moralisation of everyday consumption epitomises aspects of neoliberalism and the ways in which conservative governments encourage individuals to assume an ever-expanding list of responsibilities amidst, of course, the demise of traditional welfare institutions (see e.g. Littler, 2009). In doing so, as Carrington, Zwick and Neville (2016) argue, practices of ethical consumption not only save

“capitalism from itself but also bring about a different kind of capitalism: more just, more sustainable, kinder, and so on. In this fantasy, consumers’ everyday ethical consumption practices ensure capitalism’s survival rather than digging its grave” (p. 23).

Gender-related consumer activism is no different: by supporting projects such as EDGE individuals could be seen as complicit in the ideological construction of a more gender-equal, less patriarchal capitalism. To be sure, this is not to say that individual and corporate supporters of EDGE are not sincere in their intentions. But, as Peter Fleming and Marc Jones (2013) have vividly demonstrated in the case of Corporate Social Responsibility programmes more broadly, this is ultimately irrelevant. Such initiatives remain piece-meal solutions to structural problems. Their relationship to more progressive social movements proves to be, at best, “parasitic” (Fleming and Jones, 2013), in that they serve to let corporations off the hook--or, at the very least, give them a more favourable image-- for problems that they have often created in the first place. Likewise, market-mediated feminist activism legitimises atomised logics and practices that could not be further away from the decidedly collectivist and utopian projects of second wave feminism, lamented in the political memoirs of Lynne Segal (2017) and Sheila Rowbotham (2016) among others.

More nuanced analyses of ethical consumerism observe that “the consumer” is hardly ever the primary agent of change in efforts to politicise and moralise consumption practices (Barnett *et al.*, 2010). Instead, ethical consumption can be viewed as “an organised field of strategic interventions” (Ibid: p. 13) whereby a variety of actors across micro, meso and macro levels employ consumer-oriented discourses in their attempt to achieve a variety of outcomes (Caruana and Chatzidakis, 2014). For example, third-sector organisations may use evidence of “consumer demand” for ethical products in their attempt to push for further legislation against polluting businesses, forms of extreme labour exploitation and so on.

Likewise, EDGE can be viewed as a strategic intervention that recognises gender inequality as “an ethical issue” and which may contribute to a variety of positive discursive and institutional shifts in favour of gender equality. Notwithstanding, it would be wrong to ignore that the certification comes at a very particular historic and socio-economic moment: one in which an expanding list of social, environmental and (now) identitarian struggles are being reframed as matters of corporate initiative and individual choice, while disavowing their fundamentally structural nature. Consumers’ support for EDGE-style initiatives should be viewed as, at best, symbolic; at worst, as an unwelcome distraction from the more radical and transformative interventions that are urgently needed in combating gender inequality.

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