

The Subjects and Spaces of Ethical Consumption: doing politics in an ethical register

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In debates about climate change, human rights, sustainability, and public health, patterns of everyday consumption are identified as a problem requiring consumers to change their behaviour through the exercise of responsible choice. This project explores the contemporary problematization of consumption and consumer choice. We investigated the institutional, organisational and social dynamics behind the growth in ethical consumption practices in the UK, focussing in particular on a series of initiatives around fair trade and global trade justice. Ethical consumption is best understood as a political phenomenon rather than simply a market response to changes in consumer demand. It reflects strategies and organisational forms amongst a diverse range of governmental and non-governmental actors. It is indicative of distinctive forms of political mobilisation and representation. And it provides ordinary people with pathways into wider networks of collective action, ones which seek to link the mundane spaces of everyday life into campaigns for global justice.

KEY FINDINGS

- People bring a range of ethical concerns to their everyday consumption practices. These range from the personal responsibilities of family life to more public commitments such as membership of particular faith communities, political groups, and professional communities.
- Ethical consumption campaigns problematize everyday practices of consumption by shaping the terms of public debate and by getting people to reflect on the relationship between ‘choice’ and ‘responsibility’ in everyday consumption routines.
- People respond critically and sceptically to demands that they should take personal responsibility for various ‘global’ problems by changing their everyday consumption practices.
- The capacity of citizens to actively contribute to concerted action to transform consumption practices is socially differentiated by both material resources and cultural capital: by income levels, residential location, and personal mobility, and by involvement in social networks and associational practices.
- Ethical consumption initiatives are successful when they succeed in enabling changes in practical routines of consumption. This might include changes at the level of domestic practices or changes at the level of whole systems of urban infrastructure.
- There is little evidence that people adopt ethical

consumerism as an alternative to other forms of civic involvement or public participation. Ethical consumerism can provide pathways into involvement in broader political campaigns.

HIGHLIGHTS

Globalising the consumer

Consumerism is often held to be inimical to collective deliberation and decision-making of the sort required to address pressing environmental, humanitarian and global justice issues. Policy interventions and academic discourse alike often assume that transforming consumption practices requires interventions that address people as consumers. This research project shows that this connection between consumption and consumers is a contingent achievement of strategically motivated actors with specific objectives in the public realm. Focussing on the discursive interventions used in ethical consumption campaigns, the research found that these are not primarily aimed at encouraging generic consumers to recognise themselves for the first time as ‘ethical’ consumers. Rather, they aim to provide information to people already disposed to support or sympathise with certain causes; information that enables them to extend their concerns and commitments into everyday consumption practices. These acts of consumption are in turn counted, reported, surveyed and represented in the public realm by organisations

Findings: The Subjects and Spaces of Ethical Consumption

Right:
Shoppers in the
Bishopston area
of Bristol are
spoilt for 'ethical'
consumer choice,
while those in
Hartcliffe live in
a veritable 'food
desert'

Below:
Responsible
consumption in
a Bristol suburb
Photos: Jon Tooby



who speak for the 'ethical consumer'. These campaigns also provide supporters and sympathisers with storylines. The predominant storyline re-inscribes popular discourses of globalisation into a narrative in which people are ascribed various responsibilities by virtue of their activities as consumers but also empowered to act ethically and politically in and through these activities.

Problematizing choice

Far from 'choice' being straightforwardly championed and promoted, it is increasingly circulated as a term in policy discourse and public debate by being problematized. How to ensure that the choices of putatively free individuals are exercised responsibly – in terms both of those individuals' own good and the good of broader communities – has become a recurrent theme of concern. For example, 'choice' is problematized in terms of the potential of increased individual choice to conflict with public interest goals of sustainability and conservation; in terms of increased choice leading to greater anxiety and reduced quality of life, even reduced levels of happiness; or in terms of the limitations of choice in increasing or maintaining equity in social provision and access to public services. Ethical consumption campaigns are actively contributing to this process whereby 'choice'

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Regina Joseph, a banana grower from the Windward Islands, helps celebrate Bristol becoming Fairtrade City in March 2005. Photo: Bristol Fairtrade Network



circulates as a term of public debate only in and through this register of responsibility for the self and for others. These campaigns seek to problematize the consequences of everyday consumption by encouraging people to reflect, deliberate, and discuss the 'ethical' dilemmas of their routine practices. In turn, people negotiate these demands for them to take personal responsibility by deploying the vocabularies of citizenship to delineate the scope of their own actions they consider it possible and legitimate to change.

Fairtrade urbanism

Understandings of ethical consumption often assume a relationship between placeless western consumers and place-specific producers in the third world. Using an ethnographic study of the Bristol Fairtrade City Campaign in 2004–2005, this research project shows how fairtrade consumption is aligned with place-based interests and identities. The Fairtrade City Campaign became a vehicle for enlisting the ordinary people of Bristol into awareness of and identification with fairtrade issues. Citizens of Bristol were enrolled into re-imagining the expansive scope of the city's responsibilities. Through the introduction of fairtrade procurement practices in public organisations and private companies alike,

employees, residents and visitors became fairtrade consumers, knowingly or unknowingly, when visiting the canteens and restaurants of the local authority and other significant organisations in the city.

MESSAGES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The 'consumer' is NOT the key agent of change in efforts to change consumption practices!

- Ethical consumption campaigning is most effective in transforming policies and infrastructures of collective provision, rather than changing individual behaviour through the provision of information.
- Ethical consumption campaigns do not seek to engage 'consumers', understood as abstract, self-interested utility maximizers. They engage members of communities of practice, for example, members of faith groups, schoolchildren, or residents of distinctive localities.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The Subjects and Spaces of Ethical Consumption was funded by the ESRC/AHRC Cultures of Consumption research programme and ran from October 2003 to October 2006 (grant number: RES-143-25-0022-A). The project team consisted of Dr Clive Barnett, The Open University; Professor Paul Cloke, University of Exeter; Dr

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PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE

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CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION RESEARCH PROGRAMME

The Cultures of Consumption Programme funds research on the changing nature of consumption in a global context.

The Programme investigates the different forms, development and consequences of consumption, past and present. Research projects cover a wide range of subjects, from UK public services to drugs in east Africa, London's fashionable West End to global consumer politics. The £5 million Cultures of Consumption Programme is the first to bring together experts from the social sciences and the arts and humanities. It is co-funded by the ESRC and the AHRC.

The aims of the Cultures of Consumption Programme are:

- to understand the practice, ethics and knowledge of consumption
- to assess the changing relationship between consumption and citizenship
- to explain the shifting local, metropolitan and transnational boundaries of cultures of consumption
- to explore consumption in the domestic sphere
- to investigate alternative and sustainable consumption
- to develop an interface between cutting edge academic research and public debate.

For further details take a look at our website www.consume.bbk.ac.uk

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