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## The impossibility of ethical consumption

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### Review of

Devinney, T.M., Augur, P., and G.M. Eckhardt (2010) *The Myth of the Ethical Consumer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (PB, pp. 240, £24.99, ISBN 9780521 74755 4)

In this accessibly written book, Devinney, Augur and Eckhardt pool their differing disciplinary expertise to deliver a slap of realism to research on ethical consumerism. As scholars of strategy, information systems and marketing, the authors take aim at the hysteria of research purporting to show evidence of ethical consumers and large-scale demand for socially responsible products and services. Since so-called ethical products – or at least those marketed as such – are generally seen to have failed in the marketplace, the book sets out to investigate this discrepancy at the level of the individual consumer and their product choices. The bulk of this seven-chapter book therefore investigates ‘ordinary’ consumers’ consideration (or lack thereof) of the social features of products through a mixed methodology in different countries. The authors collate quantitative experimental investigation of individuals’ decision-making processes with reports from interpretive research on consumers’ rationalizations (chapters 3-6 and on the DVD which accompanies the book). Perhaps because of the philosophical tensions of mixed method work or possibly as a result of the multiple authorship, for me the book lacks some overall coherence and strength of message. As a result, the promise of the powerful argument captured in the book’s arresting title is only partially delivered.

Devinney, Augur and Eckhardt's central concern in the book is to rigorously consider the 'facts' (xv) of individual ethical consumer behaviour, rather than advocate the need for ethical consumerism by reiterating consumer demand for ethical products or attempting to recruit more consumers to the 'cause'. The authors therefore claim to investigate consumers' decision-making processes through a 'scientifically skeptical lens' (184) in order to bring objectivity to discussions of ethical consumerism and 'guide corporate and public policy in an informed way' (9). The overarching argument that builds through the book is that the ethical consumer beloved by market research companies, international pollsters and even some academics, is an idealization; a mythical moral hero that fails to conform to the reality of nuanced, 'flawed, self-interested' (185) everyday purchasing. Or, if we were to approach the authors' topic from a post-structuralist perspective, we could say the ethical consumer is a version of the consuming subject created and reproduced through various discourses.

The first chapter opens with a lively exposé of misplaced enthusiasm and belief in the scale of public desire for so-called ethical products. Pointing to the niche position of such products in the marketplace, their low profit and lack of ethical credentials behind the positioning (e.g. the Toyota Prius), the authors go on to identify some of the fundamental problems with the majority of extant quantitative research in the field and the prevalence of that troublesome gulf between reported attitudes and actual purchasing behaviour. The book aims to discard the 'mythological baggage' (9) of ethical consumerism – because it represents an idealization of consumer behaviour – and instead offers up the apparently 'real' theoretical construct of consumer social responsibility (C<sub>N</sub>SR). This is a helpful development we learn because the extent to which individuals consider and act on social components of products and services is now measurable and testable, morally-cleansed, and as chapter two explains, can dovetail nicely with the management concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR).

The book appears to be positioned as a remedial counterpoint to existing work on ethical consumerism/consumption (the terms are used interchangeably throughout) and written with a managerial audience of mainly CSR practitioners and policy-makers in mind. Though the authors understandably avoid attempting to summarise the mountain of scholarship on ethics and morality, there is rather too little discussion of what exactly ethical consumption – or as they prefer to call it *social* consumption – might *mean* in an everyday context for the individual. The possibilities, inconsistencies and hypocrisies are immediately obvious. Apparently suspending judgement as to what is to count as the 'ethical' or 'right' behaviour in the realm of consumption, the authors adopt a position of moral relativism early on: 'Linking consumerism to ethics, with its moral

connotations of absolute right and wrong, is difficult to justify in today's world' (5). However, though they state that their perspective is 'untainted by normative predisposition' (xv), value judgements about consumer behaviour creep into some of the empirical research and interpretation, and the authors round the book off with 'normative conclusions about what can be done to enhance social consumption' (14).

The central thrust of chapter two is to seat C<sub>N</sub>SR within a corporate context and emphasise the interplay between customers and firms with regard to ethical purchasing. Though the book is largely pro-corporate, with the final chapter offering suggestions as to how firms can improve their CSR strategies, in this chapter there is some recognition of the ways firms can manipulate the purchasing context and claim social responsibility merely for an enhanced public image. However, there is surprisingly little problematization of the concept of CSR. Glimpses of a mildly critical view on corporate strategies in this chapter could have been coupled with an acknowledgment of how CSR initiatives themselves can act to distract from or even conceal continuing environmental and social damage on the part of corporations. CSR appears to be taken as an unalloyed good and, the authors argue, could be much improved i.e. made profitable, by embracing C<sub>N</sub>SR. For those scholars concerned with the ways in which CSR can reduce issues of morality to economic logic and silence positions critical of free market ideology (see for example Muhr, Sørensen and Vallentin, 2010; Fleming and Jones, 2013), C<sub>N</sub>SR is likely to be deemed an instrument that extends the colonizing power of neo-liberalism. At times the tone seems to suggest that if only the measurement of C<sub>N</sub>SR – rather than the futile search for ethical consumers – was more accurate, corporations' CSR strategies could then be more successful, consumers would purchase more ethical products, and the market would be transformed so as to be less ecologically and socially destructive: 'For C<sub>N</sub>SR to survive and not just be a passing fad it must integrate well with existing market forces...it is only when social value becomes core that it becomes relevant and has the potential to make macro-level changes in society' (36).

In chapters three and four, the authors attempt to deal with methodological biases in the literature but without deviating from measuring instruments based on that similarly pervasive mythical figure of the rational economic, information-processing consumer. Investigated in this way then, it shouldn't be surprising that the results of a battery of sophisticated quantitative measures suggest that the majority of consumers' professed intentions to buy ethical products evaporate in everyday contexts through a series of trade-offs with other product features. Compared to functionality and price, and relative to broader social/civic issues as detailed in chapter six, the conclusion is a familiar one to marketing academics and practitioners; 'the picture of the citizen-consumer we have drawn is one of

schizophrenia on the one hand and a modicum of consistency on the other' (164). For most consumers, the information that the workers who made the shoes they want work in sweatshop conditions, or whether they are paid a 'fair' wage is irrelevant. These are additional product 'features' and not very important ones at that.

It seems to me that attending to the consumer's decision-making processes and rationalizations without a more sustained consideration of market forces and capitalist structures can lead to some naivety when dealing with ethics in the purchasing context. At the etic level I found myself wondering not, 'why don't consumers behave ethically?' – the research question posed at the start of the DVD documentary – but rather, 'how could they possibly?' Indeed, the authors recognise the enormity of topics and issues on the ethical agenda when it comes to everyday consumption – from poor working conditions to single-use batteries, from carbon emissions to counterfeit goods (and there is no mention of palm oil) – and they do not fail to recognise the role of corporations in controlling the purchasing environment through their supply chain systems and product mix (29ff). Yet in several places, it seems that the responsibility for ethical deficiencies in business, the on-going damage caused by corporate practices and processes, is placed squarely on the shoulders of the individual consumer. For example, technical analyses of economic value in chapter two concerned with 'whether or not...consumers are prepared to act upon this perceived unfairness or the externalities that exist' (18) are interpreted to show how 'CSR without C<sub>N</sub>SR will amount to little more than operational taxation and regulation...value creation from CSR is impossible without C<sub>N</sub>SR' (27, 186). Consistent with a neo-liberal discourse of the autonomous sovereign consumer, the DVD commentary also seems to implicitly blame the consumer for 'exhibiting a lack of individual responsibility' and 'pushing the responsibility' to corporations, governments and the media. Confusingly, the commentary then claims that 'consumers demand [?] a model of behaviour from corporations and governments that they themselves do not follow' [23:47] and, after scrolling images of suffering animals and protest marches, a 'lack of the concept of individual empowerment with regards to consumer ethics issues' [15:41] is framed as hindering the development of more sustainable consumption on a macro scale.

An underpinning assumption in the book seems to be that science, that champion of objectivity and rational thought, can be used to debunk the misleading myth of the ethical consumer; a myth that apparently causes much consternation for big business. One consequence of this quest for the objective 'reality' of socio-political purchasing is that the book does not address the role of emotion, an aspect highly likely to be of relevance even in a narrowed focus on product choice (Carroll and Shaw, 2012), even if this 'emotion' is indifference.

Emotional experiences do not surface in the interpretive research either (chapter 5). Indeed, the continuing influence of *homo economicus* leads the authors to concentrate on an analysis of interviewees' rationalizations, when the depth interviews might have been used to dig beneath hypothetical situations and abstractions. This seems like a missed opportunity since, in other places the authors (7, 114, 177) recognise the importance of context rather than any individual's independent proclivity to social consumption issues.

There are other puzzling methodological slips here too. The interpretive research in the book is referred to as 'ethnographic' and a 'video ethnography' (5, 13) but both the DVD and chapter devoted to reporting this work are based on the results of semi-structured interviews using prepared ethical scenarios. The researchers' judgements are clear in their selection of three 'consumer ethics situations' (120) and expressed again when they state that they 'did not find a single participant who revealed "ethical" consumption behaviors' (123), though it remains unclear as to what these might be. Though projective questions were asked, these do not appear to have been deployed in their capacity to reduce or bypass individuals' rationalizations or defence mechanisms, both of which are usually considered a hindrance to developing deeper understandings of the complex, emotional and unreasonable facets of human behaviour.

One of the problems with presenting informants with the discrepancy between beliefs and behaviour – aside from the possibility that it might be a product of oversimplified theories and associated flawed methodologies – is that it forces them to search for plausible-sounding accounts of their actions, to become naïve scientists seeking causes and effects, as the authors acknowledge on page 133: 'When this dissonance was pointed out to them, there was a distinct uneasiness that was alleviated only by calling on the most culturally amenable justification'. Challenging the adequacy of participants' narratives in this way can lead to feelings of intimidation that inhibit self-disclosure. Unsurprisingly, many informants articulated rational-sounding justifications for what may have been a complicated emotional decision, or an action motivated by a confluence of different factors unknown to the narrators themselves. But this interpretive research does not illuminate this complexity. Rather than finding out about interviewees' experiences of consumption and producing an analysis of how and where morality and ethics enter such descriptions, this study has researched how people defend themselves in an interview situation and takes the informants' 'logic' (132) *produced* by the research process as accounting for their lack of ethical concern in their purchasing experiences.

With such a bold title, I expected the book to have a more radical hue. For critical management scholars, the most obvious weakness in a text such as this is

perhaps the lack of serious consideration awarded to a critique of political economy and, in particular, the pertinent insights afforded by an application of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism. Though a few signs of a critical perspective pop up in the interpretation of interview data – where issues of labour, exploitation, capitalist production, free markets and economic growth are mentioned in the discussion *and* by participants – they remain undeveloped and sit alongside suggestions for how consumers might be dissuaded from buying counterfeit goods. For example, 'in India, China and Turkey, consumers...may begin to appreciate that higher wages and higher expenditures can benefit the economy' (132). A Marxist reading might therefore point not only to the oxymoronic nature of the 'ethical consumer' but the myth of ethics in capitalism. From such a perspective, it makes little sense to speak of types of social responsibility – consumer or corporate – because such relations are eroded for all by capitalist production and market transactions. Since the rule of the market separates workers from the products and activity of their labour, individuals are distanced from the production process, their fellow humans and themselves. No surprise then that more information about the production processes of consumer goods bears little or no influence on consumers' product choices, or that the majority of consumers surveyed revealed 'a remarkable reluctance...to make consumption choices that include a social dimension' (184). As Cluley and Dunne (2012: 255) observe in their work on ethical consumption, 'to overcome the fetishism of commodities is to overcome the nature of capitalist social relations themselves'. Consumers, managers and owners of capital are all 'freed' from any ethical or moral responsibilities by the hegemony of capital accumulation. Or, to put it more succinctly, they are alienated. Ethical consumption then is not just mythical, it is impossible.

By the end, it does feel a little disappointing that the spirit of the ethical consumer, whose exposure as false is the central argument of the book, seems only to find new form within the alternative construct of C<sub>N</sub>SR, one in which researchers' value judgements are not suspended but are deeply engrained. Furthermore, the conclusion that ethical/social preferences are actually expressions of taste, suggests that actions of C<sub>N</sub>SR turn out to be just 'consumption as usual...best understood as manifestations of consumption more generally' (39-40). Having lambasted belief in the ethical consumer as a delusion (14, 171, 186), the authors seem to undermine their own argument by promoting C<sub>N</sub>SR in its place, thereby revealing their own desire to believe in the autonomy of the sovereign consumer:

What we are saying is that people engage in consumption to satisfy their own needs, but are free to define those needs broadly so as to incorporate the welfare of others, even those unseen and at a great distance. This may include their

incorporating environmental, labor, and other social components into their decision calculus; equally, it may be that they choose not to incorporate this information...It is simply an issue of the nature of what diverse individuals find desirable and acceptable. (170)

Devinney, Augur and Eckhardt argue that the ethical consumer is a modern-day Prester John, the legendary king imagined to be riding to the rescue yet forever remaining out of reach. The ethical consumer is thus 'a mythological figure – one that does not, and cannot, exist in its idealized form but has enough human-like features for us to be deluded into believing that it is real because we need it for our salvation' (14). What seems to be missed, however, is that the notion of C<sub>N</sub>SR rests on the similarly heroic neo-liberal figure of the sovereign consumer, the vision of the 'free' consuming subject that serves to sustain capitalism ideologically.

Though *The Myth of the Ethical Consumer* may be seen as rather too hard on the individual, too sympathetic to corporations and too naïve with regard to ideology (in consumption and in research), it does raise an important issue for wider debates for marketing and consumer culture scholars. It seems that whatever consumption behaviour is deemed to be ethical or social by researchers, when investigated empirically, it simply fails to possess enough of the radical flavour, socio-political mettle or the pro-active desire for market transformation that makes the field sociologically attractive. As a by-product, the book actually serves to capture something blindingly obvious that perhaps many researchers simply prefer not to see; the irritating conundrum that much of the time many consumers just don't care that much about what *researchers* care about or, indeed, the product, service or experience it is that individuals are seen to be 'consuming'. Taking this idea seriously opens the way to a greater sensitivity to other mythic figures and discursive constructions residing in the multitude of stories we have about consumption, but without neglecting to consider the ways in which these are assembled, by whom and for what reason.

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