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**THE POLITICS OF ETHICAL CONSUMERISM:
CITIZENSHIP BETWEEN INDIVIDUALISATION AND PARTICIPATION**

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Consumer Policy Review

1). THE TRIUMPH OF MARKET INDIVIDUALISM?

‘The consumer’ has become the dominant figure in public debate in the UK, as public policy has been increasingly oriented towards extending choice and introducing market efficiencies into the delivery of public services. The shared assumption that underwrites the arguments of both proponents and critics of ‘consumer choice’ in these debates is that markets, consumers, and choice are all about individualised, materialistic, privatised and self-interest. In this, both sides cling to a highly idealised model of consumer behaviour, one that assumes that when acting as consumers, people act according to the model of the rationalising utility-maximizer of economic theory. Proponents of the market think that people *should* act like this, despite lots of evidence that *they don’t*; and critics of the market tend to assume that people *do* act like this, but think that they *ought not to*, and therefore intone them to act more responsibly.

In this paper, we want to evaluate the degree to which this picture of the activity of exercising consumer choice might actually underestimate the ways in which markets can serve as mediums for the expression of care, solidarity, and collective concern. Even if we accept that being a consumer involves the exercise of ‘choice’, it is far from the case that all relevant ‘choices’ follow the model of the individual purchasing decision in the market place summarised above. This paper draws on primary research into the development and growth of the ethical consumer sector in the UK to illustrate the ways in which consumerism and citizenship are not necessarily opposed practices at all.¹ Ethical consumerism is certainly a growth sector in the UK, but this can easily

¹ This research is funded by the ESRC/AHRB Cultures of Consumption Programme, Grant Number RES 143250022: ‘Governing the subjects and spaces of ethical consumption’.

be interpreted as an expression of a shift away from active citizenship prompted by a broader process of individualization. In their review of changing patterns of civic engagement in the UK between 1984 and 2000, Pattie *et al* (2003b, 631) found that “people’s participation in conventional political activities (such as voting, contacting a politician, and attending a political meeting) has declined, whereas participation in consumption and contact politics (boycotting goods and contacting the media) have grown significantly”. The question that arises is whether this reflects a substitution of publicly oriented collective participation by identity-based, individually motivated and privatised forms of concern? The answer to this question depends in part on just how ethical consumerism is understood and explained. In the burgeoning literature in economics and management studies on business ethics and corporate social responsibility, ethical consumerism is understood primarily in terms of the role of effective consumer demand as the medium through which the ethical preferences of consumers and the ethical records of businesses are signalled in the market place. From this perspective, markets are perfectly capable of expressing people’s ethical, moral, or political preferences just as long as appropriate informational strategies are developed (e.g. marketing, advertising, labelling, and branding). This is also a background assumption in government initiatives on sustainability, in campaigning around the environment, and across the range of ‘ethical’ trading initiatives, where it is often supposed that the main challenge is to provide people with more information in order to raise awareness of the consequences of their everyday consumption choices – then they will magically change their behaviour. But this sort of information-led approach might actually miss out a lot of factors that determine people’s consumption activities. It manages to reproduce a narrowly utilitarian

conceptualisation of ethical decision-making by consumers, companies, and public organisations alike (see Barnett, Cafaro and Newholm 2005).

In contrast to the view that ethical consumerism offers a poor substitute for genuine forms of collective political participation, in this paper we argue that contemporary forms of consumer-oriented activism provides important pathways to participation for ordinary people. And in developing this argument below, we want to suggest that this changes our understanding of what organisations and institutions involved in this sector actually do: rather than thinking about their role in terms of providing information so that consumers can express their preferences in markets, it might be more appropriate to see them as mobilising support of ‘consumers’ in order to more effectively campaign to actually change the ways in which markets are structured and regulated.

2). RETHINKING CONSUMERISM AS A SOCIABLE PRACTICE

According to the standard criticism of neoliberal consumerism, the extension of market relations leads to a depoliticising individualisation, whereby the meanings of citizenship are progressively consumerised (Bauman 1999, Needham 2003). The result, it is argued, is the eclipse of the collective dimensions of citizenship, and therefore the elision of the problem of how to arrive at collective determination of shared public good. By presuming that consumerism is equivalent to a culture of individualised self-interest, from this perspective consumerism is held to be doubly destructive: firstly, it is a source of harm in the form of environmental degradation, and the reproduction of unequal trade relations and poverty; secondly, it also mitigates against addressing these harms in anything other than a piecemeal fashion by

undermining the very possibility of arriving at publicly agreed collective environmental and conservation goals by privileging an ethos of unfettered individual freedom to pursue the acquisition of material goods (Princen *et al* 2002). Thus, debates about consumerism are also linked to wider arguments concerning the apparent decline in civic activity and political participation. The political scientist Pippa Norris (1998, Forthcoming) has argued that, rather than thinking of political participation and civic activism as in decline, it is better to think of the reinvention of participation and activism. New forms of activism and participation are in part distinguished by the *repertoires* used for political expression (e.g. buying or boycotting products, petitioning, demonstrating). Norris calls these ‘cause-oriented’ repertoires. But perhaps what is most distinctive about this new politics of choice is the nature of the agencies and collective organisations who serve as the mediators of engagement and participation. These tend to be issue-based, and to depend on relatively high levels of expertise. They are certainly distinct from political parties, and might also be more like advocacy groups than the activist-based organisations which exemplify so-called ‘new social movements’. The importance of this set of distinctions is not to construct typologies of either repertoires or organisations— these are more like ideal-types, and in practice any particular campaign is likely to combine forms of lobbying, activism, advocacy, demonstrating, and so on. Rather, it enables us to see that the rise of the ‘politics of choice’ or ‘life politics’ is not equivalent to a process of ‘de-collectivisation’. By insisting that consumer-based forms of expression and mobilisation be understood as a *repertoire* of political action, this account reminds us that this trend is not simply a spontaneous outcome of broad socio-cultural changes of individualisation, but the result of organised and strategic conduct by

collective actors who are highly attuned to the potentials of consumer-activism. Consumer-oriented activism is modular in the sense that it can be extended to open-up a range of everyday *practices* to strategic ‘ethical’ conduct by individuals and households (e.g. shopping, investment decisions, and personal banking and pensions), and also because it can be applied to a diverse range of *causes* (e.g. environmental sustainability, health and safety risks, animal welfare, fair trade, labour conditions, and human rights).

The growth of this sort of consumer-oriented activism and campaigning can only work if there is a concerted effort by organisations and institutions, but it also indicates that there are all sorts of latent values involved in being a ‘consumer’ that these campaigns are able to tap into. One aspect of our research has investigated the sorts of values ordinary people think are important when it comes to simple things like doing the weekly shop. To do this, we used focus-groups consisting of people from a variety of different backgrounds and occupations. The focus groups were conducted across the city of Bristol, using government data on levels of social exclusion at ward level as a selection principle, to gain some insight into the different sorts of values that people are concerned with when they ‘do’ consumption. The results show that, not surprisingly, people are concerned about value for money, which may seem like a rather self-interested, perhaps individualistic concern. But this concern with value for money is actually embedded in much broader concerns which people have about, for example, what to put in their kids’ packed lunches, or about the health impacts on themselves and their loved-ones of different sorts of foods that they might be buying. Ordinary consumption is already shaped in all sorts of ways by values of caring for other people, and sometimes, by quite explicit moral values

drawn, for example, from the faith communities or ethnic groups to which they belong. So, our first point is that there is a diverse range of values and commitments that guide people's routine shopping, investment, and consumption practices, ranging from personal health and local community issues to environmental values, faith-based commitments, and concerns over global poverty. Our second point follows from this, and it is that a great deal of the 'consuming' people do is not undertaken by them as 'consumers' at all, but is embedded in other sorts of practices where they are enacting other identities. It is important to recognise the ways in which consumption is embedded in other social practices – being a good parent, a caring partner, or a good friend - because this helps us see that campaigns or policies that focus solely on providing information about the consequences of everyday consumerism, in the expectation that this will be enough to motivate changes in people's behaviour, underestimate the extent to which people find themselves 'locked into' certain patterns of consumption. This is partly to do with the extent to which some sorts of consumption are integral to people's sense of themselves as persons. It is also, more mundanely, to do with the types of access and the sorts of opportunities that different people have to exercise any sort of choice over their consumption patterns. Let's return to Bristol again. If one walks down the Gloucester Road in the Bishopston area in the north of the city, in the space of about 500 yards you can pass by a whole range of retail outlets where one can buy fairly traded food and clothes, shop in charity shops, buy organic produce, eat in coffee shops and pubs selling fairly traded or organic food and drink. It is actually quite difficult not to be an 'ethical consumer' if you live close to this middle-class part of town. By way of contrast, you could visit Hartcliffe, an outer-estate on the southern edge of the city, which is one of the most

deprived wards in the whole of the UK. Hartcliffe is a veritable “food desert”. A local cooperative group, Food for All, provide some retail access to locally produced organic food in the area, but this example of ‘ethical consumerism’ is less about exercising choice than about improving the provision of basic staples. The simple geography of ‘ethical’ retailing in Bristol helps us see that there might be more to changing people’s consumer behaviour than simply intoning them to be more ‘responsible’. Our research shows that people don’t necessarily lack information about fair trade or organic food at all. They actually seem very aware of these types of things, but they often don’t feel that they have the opportunities or resources to be able to engage in these sorts of activities. The ability to be an ‘ethical consumer’ is, in short, shaped by all sorts of factors. Income level is of course a crucial factor, but this does not stand alone. It is connected to a range of other issues to do with access to the resources necessary to be able to exercise ‘choice’ in markets for consumer products. And it is worth remembering just how diverse the activities that might be called ‘ethical consumption’ actually are. They might include growing your own food on an allotment; increasingly they include a range of financial services; it might involve boycotting certain products. The important point about all these activities is that to be an ‘ethical’ consumer in this diverse set of ways does not really depend on having information *per se*, as much as it depends on being provided with practical ways of actually making changes to consumption activity which can then become routinised. The best example of this is of course the trusty recycling bin, provided by the local council, which is an incredibly simple device which works to enable every household to become just a little bit more ‘sustainable’.

So, we have suggested that people bring a diverse range of values to their consuming behaviour, and that these values are embedded in various practices of sociability. This in turn leads us to suggest that the prevalent informational model of ethical consumerism needs to be rethought. The growth of this sector is not best explained by people becoming more ethically aware by virtue of learning about the extended consequences of their actions, and nor are changes in behaviour just responses to being provided with information about alternatives. Rather, this trend is the outcome of organised efforts by a variety of collective actors to *practically re-articulate* the ordinary moral dispositions of everyday consumption. There are two dimensions to this process of practical re-articulation (see Barnett, Cloke, Clarke, and Malpass 2005). Firstly, there is a process of discursive engagement with the frames of reference that already shape people's consumer behaviour. Campaigning materials and modes of address that are sensitive to the experiential horizons of ordinary consumers are more likely to succeed than those that suppose that consumers normally lead constricted, self-interested moral lives. Secondly, there is the process of using various devices to actually enable people to readjust their consumption behaviour. Recycling boxes are an example of this; so is the labelling of food and other products; vegetable box delivery schemes are another; direct-debit donations to charities another. Both aspects of articulating the habitual routines of everyday consumption with broader programmes illustrate that initiatives around 'ethical consumption' do not simply aim to facilitate the realization of already existing but somehow frustrated ethical commitments; they are, rather, part of broader projects which aim to transform understandings of people's wants, needs, desires, and satisfactions. They are, then, political initiatives in a double sense, in so far as they

aim to bring about far-reaching social changes through organised activity, and also in so far as they aim also to transform the identifications that people bring to their engagements with others.

3). PATHWAYS TO PARTICIPATION

We saw earlier that there has been a significant increase in ethical consumerism as a means by which people aim to influence political outcomes. Rather than seeing forms of civic engagement as mutually exclusive, however, it is worth considering Pattie *et al's* (2003a) argument that there are three broad types of civic activism: *individualistic activism* involves relatively individual acts, and includes purchasing or boycotting particular goods for political reasons, giving money or raising money for an organization, signing a petition, voting, or wearing a campaign badge; *contact activism* involves actions that focus on contacting people in authority, including politicians, public officials, the media, a solicitor, or an organization; and *collective activism*, which involves participating in activities alongside other people, such as taking part in a political demonstration, attending political meetings, illegal protests, or strikes. Importantly, they conclude that people who engage in individualistic activism such as ethical consumerism “are no more or less likely to engage in collective activities or to contact the authorities than those who are not ‘individualistic activists’” (ibid, 448). This is an important point precisely because it cautions against zero-sum interpretations of ethical consumerism as a substitute for robust civic participation as a citizen. But it also suggests that we need to be careful not to simply celebrate the growth of ethical consumerism as a straightforward upsurge of new forms of citizenly activity. In this section we outline some of the different ways in

which consumer-oriented activism and advocacy engages with people's imaginative and practical horizons, and the extent to which these different approaches can be understood to provide pathways from individualized decision-making to more collaborative and collective forms of engagements. Our research includes case-studies of different organized campaigns and organizational strategies across the broad field of ethical consumerism, and each helps illustrate the process of re-articulating people's habitual dispositions into new networks of affiliation and solidarity by deploying various repertoires of action.

Our first case study examines the growth of a sector of print media dedicated to the support and promotion of ethical and sustainable consumption. Here, we are referring primarily to magazines such as *The Ethical Consumer*, produced by the Ethical Consumer Research Association (ECRA); *Ergo*, the magazine of the environmental group Global Action Plan; and *The Ecologist* and *New Consumer* magazines, as well as *The Ethical Investor*, produced by the Ethical Investment Research Service. None of these has a huge distribution; they depend primarily on subscriptions and distribution through specialist retail outlets, and more recently also web-based distribution as well. They might be best characterised as constituting a kind of alternative media public which establishes connections between organisations and committed audiences of supporters, subscribers, and members. On the face of it, they also seem firmly committed to the sort of informational strategy we have called into question here. But none of these magazines is simply guides to being a better consumer. Rather, the features they regularly contain assessing the ethical credentials of different products is embedded in wider context of campaigning material. The

objectives of these magazines are as much about raising awareness, maintaining mobilisation, and validating the respective organisations activities to members or supporters as they are about providing information about what to and what not to buy. These niche media are supplemented by a number of books that also support ethical and green consumerism: *The Green Consumer Guide*, first published in 1988; *The Good Shopping Guide*, supported by ECRA; and more recently, the New Internationalist's *Do the Right Things!* and *The Rough Guide to Ethical Shopping*. The growth of book publishing around ethical consumerism illustrates a trend towards the mainstreaming of this set of issues that is also indicated by the exponential growth in news coverage of 'ethical consumption' or 'ethical trade' issues in the mainstream newspaper press since the early 1990s, as well as the increasing attention given to 'ethical' issues in business reporting and in consumer advocacy media such as *Which?*. Again, this is not a spontaneous response to changing social habits or consumer demands; it reflects the concerted efforts of activists and advocates in establishing and maintaining source relationships with journalists and news organisations. One of the distinctive ways in which organisations and campaigners have managed to attract mainstream media attention is by being able to mobilise 'the ethical consumer' as a newsworthy narrative figure. Producing surveys and opinion polls is a crucial tactic in this respect, enabling campaigners to illustrate the growth of ethical consumerism as well as the degree of potential growth that might be possible in this sector. The annual Ethical Purchasing Index, for example, which is produced by ECRA, the Co-Op, and the New Economics Foundation, has become a staple of news coverage every year. Here, then, we can see that both alternative and mainstream media are an important area of campaigning not only as a means of

reaching audiences, but also as a way of mobilising ‘soft’ power over powerful actors such as policy-makers or corporations by demonstrating the existence of a broad-based constituency of concern.

This same relationship between engaging consumers and in turn mobilising consumer support against other institutions is evident in our second case-study, which examines the dynamics of the Fairtrade Foundation’s (FTF) fairtrade town and city campaign. In 2000, a group of Oxfam activists in Garstang announced that their town was the first Fairtrade Town in the world. The Fairtrade Foundation (FTF) immediately seized upon the campaign strategy as a device they could formalise into a national campaign. By Fairtrade Fortnight in 2005, 100 towns and cities in Britain had been awarded Fairtrade Town/City certification, with more than 200 others currently campaigning for Fairtrade certification. One of the successful cities in 2005 was Bristol, and our research tracked the year-long process leading-up to this success in order to identify the types of strategies involved in this campaign. There are two important aspects of the dynamics of ethical consumerism that the Bristol campaign reveals. Firstly, the fairtrade city campaign was used by campaigners and local authority actors to enlist ordinary people in Bristol, to raise awareness about fairtrade issues and support for the city’s own bid for certification. This aspect of the campaign depended on the careful calibration of a set of local concerns – playing on Bristol’s heritage as a trading city, for example – with the more global concerns of the fairtrade movement around global trade and the alleviation of poverty. Arguing that the certification would be ‘good for Bristol’ was a means by which various different interests – including businesses, local government departments, local charities,

community groups, trade unions, as well as ordinary people – were gathered together into support for a campaign whose primary beneficiaries are, in principle, people living a long way away, in the Caribbean, or in West Africa, or in Central America. This links to the second aspect of the campaign, which was less to do with public campaigning to raise awareness and support but focussed instead upon making the procurement practices of local authority departments consistent with principles of fair trade and sustainability. Here the campaign involved enlisting the support of key professional actors not with the aim of addressing consumers directly, but rather to change the systems of collective provisioning of whole organisations, both public bodies like council canteens and restaurants, as well as important local businesses, like Bristol Zoo and Wessex Water. What the fairtrade city campaign indicates, then, is that organisations operate at different levels to enlist support and transform consumption practices: sometimes they deploy devices that are presented as extending *choices to consumers*, which help to raise awareness amongst a broad general public; sometimes they engage at an institutional level to change the ways in which consumption is *regulated* at the level of whole systems of provisioning.

One claim of the FTF is that it's own campaigning around the fairtrade town and city initiative, or its annual Fairtrade Fortnight campaign, helps to amplify more directly political campaigns such as the Trade Justice Movement or the Make Poverty History campaign. One of the distinctive things about these sorts of campaigns is the way they draw diverse organisations into alliances around specific issues and causes. The Trade Justice Movement, for example, represents a broad alliance of organisations including charities (e.g. Oxfam, Christian Aid, CAFOD) and ethical traders (e.g. Traidcraft) in a campaign to reorder the rules of international trade in support of poverty reduction

and environmental protection in poor countries. The Trade Justice Movement campaign forms part of a longer-term flow of activity, both in terms of the previous energies of the constituent organisations, and relating to other specific campaigns such as Jubilee 2000 and Drop the Debt. It has now been subsumed into the wider current Make Poverty History campaign. These sorts of campaigns enable individual organisations to retain their particular strands of campaigning around trade justice (which draw on diverse forms of secular and/or spiritual ethos, different donor and funding relationships, and different types of support or membership), while pooling these various resources of expertise, funding, and support into high impact campaigns. Although ethical consumerism may be one aspect of these sorts of campaigns – both in terms of organisations involved and in terms of one aspect of the campaigning – it is subsumed in a large wider repertoire of practices that go to make up the Trade Justice Movement. For example, a key organisation in this campaign is Christian Aid. Christian Aid works through membership networks, church-based networks, event networks (e.g. music and other arts festivals) and more general appeals. They provide opportunities for a wide range of responses by which people can choose to adopt a seemingly ethical form of identity: by using standardised materials for letter campaigns to prominent politicians; by wearing badges or wristbands, or displaying bumper stickers or window signs; by joining organised ‘street events’ such as Picnic in the Park and peaceful demonstration at key meetings such as annual Party conferences and international economic summits. These activities reflect both a sense of organisational ethos, and a political acceptability for networked individuals, who are nevertheless presented with vehicles for virtuous action and radical expressions

for change. Here, then, ethical consumerism is thoroughly embedded in a wider network of political participation.

One thing that trade justice campaigns illustrate is the shared sense amongst diverse campaign organisations that changing the ways markets work involves more than simply changing people's consumer behaviour, but also requires concerted political action. This connects us to our fourth case study, which addresses a field of economic activity in which the potential for mobilising consumer pressure to change market rules might be quite restricted. Pesticide Action Network's 'Moral Fibre Campaign' aims to have 10% of all global cotton production using organic materials and being fairly traded by 2010. Fairly traded, organic clothing involves fairtrade producers, but it also involves a whole range of intermediary actors such as millers, weavers, dyers and printers, tailors and embroiderers, as well as distributors and retailers. A strong emphasis of this campaign is on enlisting the support of these intermediary actors in order to change supply-chain practices. In particular, attention has been focussed on the role of buyers and retailers in the garment industry, such as *Marks and Spencer*, which recently decided to source an organic cotton range for its sportswear. The Moral Fibre Campaign illustrates the extent to which campaigning around ethical consumption extends well beyond simply addressing consumers. But it also indicates the internal tensions within this field – one issue the campaign has had to negotiate is the relationship between using organically produced materials and using fairly-traded materials, two movements which draw on quite distinctive understandings of what it is to act 'ethically' in the first place. This same tension is revealed in our fifth case study, which examines the growth of innovative forms of distribution that deliver 'ethical' products directly to people's homes. Founded in the mid-1980s by Guy

Watson, and located just outside of Totnes in Devon, Riverford Organic Vegetables is the UK's largest organic vegetable supplier and distributor. While Riverfood started as a small operation aiming to provide good food to discerning consumers, it has grown into a highly professionalized organisation while avoiding what it the usual 'villains' of British food provision, the major supermarkets, through innovations such as home delivery of boxes of vegetables to people's doorsteps as well as franchising agreements. Riverfood has thus managed to grow without entering the mainstream retail market. But Riverfood is not an explicitly political or campaign organisation. Traidcraft, on the other hand, is, and it uses various forms of home retailing to enlist people more directly into broader activities of solidarity and campaigning. Established in 1979, Traidcraft seeks to fight poverty through trade. Its activities are rooted in church-based networks, but over a quarter of a century Traidcraft has innovated devices and strategies to maintain support in these networks and extend it beyond them: from selling craft products to selling crafts and food, then clothes, using local groups in people's homes to using mail order catalogues and then mainstreaming into supermarkets. In all of this activity, Traidcraft claims to connect its diverse organisational activities with the different activities it enables ordinary people to participate in: "The help and support of people like you is vital in assisting our *trade* work by *buying* Traidcraft products, helping our *support* work by making *donations* and joining in our *influencing* work by *campaigning* and spreading awareness among your friends and colleagues" (Traidcraft, 2005).

The Fairtrade town campaign, the Moral Fibre campaign, and Traidcraft all indicate the extent to which campaigning around ethical consumption extends beyond the usual scenes of consumerism (the high street, the shopping mall, and supermarket)

and also addresses a host of actors beyond the much celebrated and much maligned ‘consumer’. These same features are also illustrated by our sixth case study, which examines the opportunities for campaigning and mobilisation that have opened up in schools in the last decade or so. The main impetus has been changes in curriculum instigated at a national level, particularly the introduction of a formal Citizenship Education curriculum. This has prompted a wide range of organisations to formulate curriculum materials which present various ethical issues to schoolchildren. Aware of the increasing burdens placed on teachers, organisations can offer ready-made material which fits well with desired themes of sustainability, multiculturalism and justice. The content and delivery of these contributions vary, from a simple posting of information and lesson plans on websites, to sophisticated systems of volunteers and professionals making themselves available to go into schools to teach particular sessions. For example, the Co-operative Society has a programme to establish “school co-operatives”, to raise awareness of both co-operative principles and fairtrade. The Fairtrade Foundation certifies schools as fairtrade schools, encouraging pupils and students to engage in various activities to gain this certification. With this example, we have come full circle in our argument. Schools are pre-eminently sites of education and learning of course, but it is here that we see the relationship between raising awareness and the organised provision of repertoires to articulate existing practices into new networks at its most innovative. And it is not just as consumers that these school-based address students and pupils alike, but as *citizens*.

4). CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have outlined a practice-based approach to the explanation and assessment of the growth of ethical consumerism and the role of organisations in this process. We have emphasised the need to look beyond narrow understandings of markets and consumers, and look instead at the complex articulation of individual actions, social interactions, and organised regulation that shape different practices of consumption. The growth of ethical consumerism is not simply about spontaneous changes in consumer demand being met by more or less elastic market supply; nor is the politics of this activity primarily about the aggregation of myriad privatised preferences. The organisations involved in this field embed consumer-oriented activism in wider programmes of mobilisation, activism, lobbying and campaigning: they use products to make contact with ordinary people and to raise awareness of campaigns, before enrolling ordinary people in more ‘active’ forms of political engagement, like donating, joining as a member, or volunteering. And they in turn use the purchases of ‘ethical’ products like signatures on a petition, as evidence of support and legitimacy for their campaigns and for validation to their own constituencies. In short, in many cases, for both organisations and for consumers, spending money on ethical products is a means less an individual economic act, and more of a means of acting in relation to larger collective projects. Our research on the practices and organised dynamics of ethical consumerism suggests that the aims and objectives of consumer-oriented activism are best understood in terms of providing people with means of registering their support for particular causes, support which draws on various motivations, rather than seen narrowly as providing a means of directly altering market conditions by exercising purchaser power. This suggests that ethical consumerism might be less significant in purely economic terms than is often claimed,

in so far as it does not represent a spontaneous expression of consumer demand, while being more significant in political terms than is often acknowledged, in so far as it is an important aspect of new forms of organisation, campaigning, and mobilisation around issues of global trade, world poverty, and social justice.

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