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Abstract

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 paper questions the assumption that the politics of consumption naturally implies a problematisation of consumer identities; it argues that this connection between consumption and consumers is a contingent achievement of strategically motivated actors with specific objectives in the public realm. This argument is developed through a case study of ethical consumption campaigning in the UK. Existing work in geography on alternative food networks, commodity chains and fairtrade acknowledges the political intentions of such initiatives but also expresses unease about the registers of 'consumption', 'ethics' and 'responsibility' in

which they are embedded. Focussing on the discursive interventions used in ethical consumption campaigns, we argue 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 who speak for the 'ethical consumer'. These campaigns also provide supporters and sympathisers with narrative storylines. We focus on one of these storylines, which 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. We conclude that ethical consumption campaigning is a political phenomenon in which everyday consumption practices are reconstituted as the sites for citizenly acts that reach beyond the realm of consumption *per se*.

Keywords

Citizenship, Ethical Consumption, Genealogy, Globalisation, Governmentality, Mobilisation

Consumers, Citizenly Acts, and New Ways of Being Political

The identification of "runaway consumption" as a "problem of growing proportions" (Amin and Thrift 2005, 230) has fostered a range of research in geography. This

includes work on alternative food networks (e.g. Whatmore and Thorne 1997), commodity chains (e.g. Cook *et al* 2004), sustainable consumption (e.g. Hobson 2006), fairtrade foods (e.g. Goodman 2004) and material cultures of re-use and disposal (e.g. Gregson and Crewe 2003). The focus of much this research is on the problem of how to motivate consumers to change individual or household consumption behaviour. This is also the primary focus of mainstream research on consumption in fields such as management, marketing, psychology and business studies. This way of problematising *consumption* with reference to the attitudes and behaviour of *consumers* takes for granted a relationship which needs to be subjected to critical analysis (see Barnett *et al* 2005). Academic analysis on the identities of consumers mirrors broader policy discourses that tend to focus overwhelmingly on information, awareness and individual consumer choice (Shove 2003, Ch.1). This tends to overplay the extent to which people's affective investments in consumption *practices* are malleable (Warde 2005). It also tends to obscure the extent to which a great deal of consumption has little to do with consumer choice but is, rather, determined by the organisation of collective infrastructures of provisioning (Van Vliet *et al* 2005). Both of these points have led to the predominant emphasis on information-led strategies aimed at changing consumer behaviour to be questioned (e.g. Global Action Plan 2004, Hobson 2002, Slocum 2004). Building on these practice-based understandings of the politics of consumption, this paper explores the contingent articulation of discourses of consumption with discourses of consumerism through a case study of the campaigning strategies behind the growth of so-called ethical consumption in the United Kingdom. Our aim is to identify the distinctive political rationality of this sort of campaigning and to challenge the assumption that it

substitutes a privatised and individualistic form of action that is at odds with public and collective modes of participation.

The shared terrain of current debates about consumerism, citizenship and the public realm is the assumption that consumerism represents a culture of individualised, egoistical self-interest. Proponents of market-led reforms of public sector institutions hold that extending 'choice' is the only way to secure the long-term legitimacy of public services in a context where people's identities and loyalties are no longer defined by reference to work and the labour market but by what they buy (e.g. Leighton 2003, NCC 2004). Critics assert that people have shrunk away from public participation and civic engagement into more privatised, consumer-led lives (Bauman 1999). The result, it is argued, is the eclipse of collective dimensions of citizenship and the conflation of the collective determination of shared public interest with the market-mediated aggregation of private preferences.

The supposedly depoliticising effects of consumerism are thought to be particularly problematic because, just at the moment when 'the consumer' seems to have triumphed as the epitome of modern living, so *consumption* itself has become as an increasingly problematic realm of contemporary governance. In campaigns around climate change and environmental sustainability, public health, and global poverty, excessive levels of material consumption in the West are identified as fundamental causes of various harms: environmental degradation, personal illness and socio-economic inequality. From the perspective that sees the rise of consumerism as a fundamentally depoliticising trend, policy approaches and public campaigns that address people as consumers only compound the real problem (e.g. Princen *et al* 2003). What is really needed, it is argued, is a reinvigoration of a more collective, republican form of citizenship (e.g. Needham 2003).

Debates about consumerism are, then, closely linked to wider arguments concerning the apparent decline in civic activity and political participation (see Pattie *et al* 2003). Through a case-study of ethical consumption campaigning in the UK, this paper challenges the taken-for-granted assumption that consumers are purely self-interested actors expressing their choices and preferences in markets (cf. Smith 2004). We argue that current debates which set the egoistical, individualised 'consumer' against the virtue of the collectively oriented 'citizen' might well miss a great deal about how new forms of *citizenly action* are currently being configured through creative redeployment of the repertoires of consumerism.

What is known as ethical consumption in the UK bears a close resemblance to what European scholars and activists have called 'political consumerism' (Micheletti *et al* 2003, Stolle *et al* 2005). We suggest that it too should be approached primarily as a form of civic or political participation, raising questions about citizenship and mobilisation. Ethical consumption is in important respects distinctive from anti-consumerist movements (Littler 2005, Zavestoski 2002) such as the voluntary simplicity movement (Cherrier and Murray 2002, Shaw and Newholm 2002) or 'No Logo' forms of anti-globalisation campaign (Klein 2000). Rather than rejecting the persona of 'consumer', ethical consumption represents a distinctive strategy for connecting the politics of consumption with the practices of being a discerning, choosey consumer. It is more aligned with slow food movements (Andrews 2005), although often more populist in its methods and objectives. Ethical consumption is also distinct from the related and growing area of ethical investment (Carter and Huby 2005). It seeks to embed altruistic, humanitarian, solidaristic and environmental commitments into the rhythms and routines of everyday life – from drinking coffee, to buying clothes, to making the kids' packed lunch. But it must also, we suggest, be

analysed not simply in terms of the changes to patterns of consumption that it succeeds in generating. Ethical consumption, understood as an organised movement, seeks to use everyday consumption as a surface of mobilisation for wider, explicitly political aims and agendas. Thus, it marks an innovation in modes of 'being political' (Isin 2002) in which people are encouraged to recognise themselves as bearing certain types of *global* obligation by virtue of their privileged position as consumers; obligations which in turn they endeavour to discharge in part by acting as consumers in 'responsible' ways. In short, we argue that the contemporary problematisation of consumption through the repertories of consumerism often involves *doing politics in an ethical register*.

Ethical consumption seems to fall under the description of what Pattie *et al* (2003) call *individualistic activism*, as distinct from both *contact activism* and *collective activism*. It involves relatively anonymous individual acts, as distinct from acts which aim to contact people in authority or those which involve participating alongside other people. But there is no need to see different modes of civic engagement as mutually exclusive. People who engage in individualistic activism such as ethical consumption "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). In the analysis which follows, we demonstrate that ethical consumption actually combines elements of all three of these ideal-types of civic engagement. It might therefore be better characterised in terms of what Micheletti (2003) calls 'individualised collective action': "citizen-prompted, citizen-created action involving people taking charge of matters that they themselves deem important in a variety of arenas"; which she distinguishes from forms of political engagement "involving taking part in structured behaviour already in existence and oriented toward the political system *per se*" (*ibid*,

25). The emergence of individualised collective action is, however, dependent on the activities of various intermediary actors – non-governmental organisations, advocacy groups, social movement organisations. These facilitate innovative forms of civic and political participation which are appropriate to situations where "citizens must juggle their lives in situations of unintended consequences, incomplete knowledge, multiple choices and risk-taking" (*ibid*).

Following from this understanding, we analyse ethical consumption as part of an emergent *politics of choice* distinct from a longer established *politics of loyalty* based on parties and elections. Norris (2007) argues that this new style of politics is distinctive for two reasons. Firstly, it is associated with particular *repertoires* used for political expression (e.g. buying or boycotting products, petitioning, demonstrating). Norris calls these 'cause-oriented' repertoires. And secondly, this new politics of choice is associated with particular *agencies* who serve as the mediators of engagement and participation. These tend to be issue-based organisations, depend on relatively high levels of expertise, and focus on the production, exchange and distribution of knowledge and information. They are certainly distinct from political parties and are also more like advocacy groups than the activist-based organisations often taken to exemplify so-called 'new social movements' (Keck and Sikkink 1998, Diani and Bison 2004).

Our analysis of ethical consumption in the UK investigates both the *repertoires* and *agents* of participation involved in this movement. We flesh out both dimensions through a consideration of the campaigning repertoires characteristic of ethical consumption organisations in the UK over the last two decades. We focus in particular on the way in which these organisations are effectively 'globalising the consumer' by providing practical and narrative pathways to people to act as 'ethical'

consumers. We argue that the process of mobilisation has a double resonance: it involves engaging with the practices of people who are already supporters or sympathisers with certain causes; but it also seeks to represent their expressed preferences as 'ethical' subjects to other actors involved in making markets including state agents, corporations and regulatory agencies. In Section 2, we flesh out a genealogical conception of 'the consumer' that emphasises how the coincidence of the contemporary problematisation of consumption and the proliferation of discourses of 'the consumer' only comes about through the strategic efforts of various actors to engage people as 'consumers'. In Sections 3 and 4, we then identify the distinctive repertoires of engagement and participation that are characteristic of the rise of ethical consumption and which lay heavy emphasis on information, knowledge and narrative devices.

Genealogies of the Ethical Consumer

Accounts of consumerism and the consumer tend often to be couched in an explicitly historicist register. Consumerism is always on the rise, eclipsing other, supposedly more virtuous forms of social activity. The historicism that characterises discussions of 'the consumer' tends to erase from view the variability of consumer subjectivities (Trentmann 2005). It also ignores the degree to which this variability is dependent on the active facilitation of consumer subjectivities by strategic actors including the state, corporations and companies, and, not least, non-governmental organisations. In order to restore this double emphasis, we want to critically develop some insights from genealogical approaches to conceptualising 'the consumer'.

The most influential genealogical approach to understanding the contemporary prevalence of the figure of 'the consumer' is work informed by Foucault's ideas on

'governmentality' (Dean 1999). This work sees the rise of 'the consumer' as just one effect of a thoroughgoing transformation in the political rationalities governing relationships between states, citizens and markets. Under so-called advanced liberal styles of government, the concept of the citizen is apparently transformed from one based on a notion of a subject with entitlement rights against a social state, to a 'responsibilised' citizen modelled on the consumer who activates personal preferences in the marketplace (Larner 1997). The key point of this account is that the rise of the consumerised-citizen does not just follow automatically from shifts in the social relations of production, distribution and consumption, or from general trends of modernisation or secularisation. It is, rather, an active achievement brought about by many different actors and "marked by the proliferation of new apparatuses, devices and mechanisms for the government of conduct and forms of life" (Rose 1999, 164). From this perspective, the consumer is 'mobilised' in different ways by intermediary actors who make it possible for people to act as consumers, that is, as choosing subjects (Miller and Rose 1997).

The governmentality approach has the advantage of focussing on the diversity of agents, knowledges and technologies involved in working up the 'consumer' as a surface of government. The relevance of this approach to understanding the emergence of ethical consumption has been demonstrated by Lockie's (2002) analysis of the growth in Australia's organic food sector. This is explained not as a response to consumer demand but rather by reference to the active dissemination of discourses of ethical responsibility by intermediaries including supermarket retailers, nutritionists and market researchers. So mobilising the 'ethical consumer' has a double-sided aspect to it: on the one hand, it involves organisations making practical and narrative resources available to people to enable them to act as 'responsible' subjects not only

in relation to their own circumscribed criteria of utility but also in relation to broader social and environmental 'responsibilities'; on the other hand, it involves organisations making a collective of 'consumers' knowable through market research, surveys and other technologies in order to speak in their name in policy arenas and the public realm.

While its strength lies in its focus on the active constitution of the figure of 'the consumer', there is still a strong historicist tenor to the Foucauldian analysis of advanced liberalism. The rise of 'the consumer' as a dominant subject-position for our times is too easily accounted for by a singular shift from the social state to post-welfarism, or as a dominant tendency or trend of our era (Rose 1996). This historicism tends to underplay the variable combinations between modes of consumption and practices of consumerism. We therefore prefer the type of genealogy of the consumer sketched by Trentmann (2006). He argues that the relationship between systems of commodity provisioning and consumer identity is historically contingent. Commodity consumption does not necessarily produce a self-understanding of people as consumers and nor is the politics of consumption necessarily articulated through forms of consumer politics. Likewise, Gabriel and Lang (1995) argue that the consumer is a variable figure mobilised by different interests at different points – sometimes as a chooser, or as a communicator, or as a victim, or as a citizen, or as an identity-seeker, or as an activist. This implies that the politics of consumption is analytically distinct from and of wider scope than consumer politics *per se*.

The assumption in many debates that consumerism is a vehicle for self-interest is also belied by the history of consumer activism. This history illustrates the degree to which the rise of consumerism has long been associated with innovative ways of

expressing other-regarding concerns and solidarities (Hilton 2005, Sassatelli 2006). Consumer activism, which focuses upon the mobilisation of people to secure various rights as consumers in the marketplace (quality, safety, fair pricing and so on), is distinct from the use by other movements of the repertoires of consumerism as a means through which to mobilise support or attention for causes that extend the arena of consumer rights itself. The labour movement, co-operative societies, trade justice campaigns, the peace movement and other movements have all constructed the consumer as a subject-position through which people can exercise broader rights and obligations as citizens. Contemporary ethical consumption builds on the solidarity concerns of the latter sort of movements, but seeks to embed these in everyday concerns with the quality of goods and services consumed in homes and workplaces.

This genealogical approach underscores the historically contingent relationship between the problematisation of consumption on the one hand, and the mobilisation of political subjects as consumers on the other (Barnett *et al* 2005). In the following analysis, we trace the "discursive positioning" (Harré and van Langenhove 1991) of individuals as 'consumers' in ethical consumption campaigning in order to question the assumption that the primary objective of these campaigns is to create new identities from scratch. We argue, rather, that these campaigns seek to channel existing but disparate dispositions into focussed engagements with state agencies, corporations or regulators. Ethical consumption is characterised by specific rationalities and strategies through which various organisations from outside the realm of formal politics seek to 'act upon the actions' of ordinary people at the same time as they seek to articulate these actions into networks of affiliation, campaigning and mobilisation that address powerful, often global actors. By examining the means through which organisations speak *for* ethical consumers in the public realm, we use

this case study to develop the conceptual argument that these campaigning rationalities aim to facilitate certain sorts of calculable *acts*, rather than certain types of *identity*.

The next two sections develop this argument by looking at how ethical consumption campaigns deploy two of the repertoires that distinguish contemporary advocacy organisations: generating and distributing information; and shaping narrative frames (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 9-10). Rather than presuming that the primary function of information in ethical consumption campaigning is to address consumers in the hope of changing their behaviour, we argue in Section 3 that information is deployed as a means of mobilising existing supporters and sympathisers, and that information is also a crucial means by which organisations speak for 'consumers' in the public realm. In Section 4, we look at the creative re-inscription by ethical consumption campaigners of narratives of globalisation as a phenomenon that empowers people to act as consumers. We argue that herein lays one of the most distinctive features of this type of campaigning through which people are provided with pathways towards enacting various types of global responsibility.

Mobilising the Ethical Consumer

We use the concept of mobilisation here in a double sense to refer to how organisations enrol existing supporters and sympathisers into new modes of campaigning, and how myriad discrete acts of purchasing are represented in the public realm as indicative of coherent trends in consumer preference for more 'ethical', 'responsible' forms of production, distribution and provisioning. We focus on both aspects of the 'informational politics' of ethical consumption in this section.

One way of analysing the rationalities of ethical consumption is to investigate the proliferation of 'How-to' guides published in this sector in the UK. There are a number of these 'what-to-and-not-to-buy' publications, including books such as the New Internationalist's *Do the Right Thing!* and the recent *Rough Guide to Ethical Shopping*, as well as regular magazines such as *The New Consumer* and *The Ecologist*, which also publishes *Go Mad! 365 Daily Ways to Save the Planet*. These guides seem to conform to a broader rationality that holds that the key to altering consumption patterns lies in providing information to individual consumers so that they can then change their own behaviour through exercising 'responsible' consumer choice. Ethical consumption is easily seen as a reconfiguration of standard models of consumer sovereignty and market choice which are understood to be constrained only by lack of information. On this view, the role of pressure groups and campaign organisations is to reconfigure market relations by providing wider and different sorts of information to consumers. This understanding seems to be illustrated by one of the first guides to ethical consumption in the UK, first published in the late 1980s, *The Green Consumer Guide*. Its starting premise is succinct and to-the-point:

> "Clearly, if the relevant information is presented in the right way, then more and more of us will become sufficiently interested to take action through our day-to-day decisions" (Elkington and Hailes 1988, 1-2).

The same kind of assumption seems to underlie the work of one of the leading ethical consumption organisations in the UK, the Ethical Consumer Research Association (ECRA), publisher of *The Ethical Consumer* magazine. ECRA's mission statement explicitly registers an organisational commitment to the transformative role of information provided to individual consumers:

> "Most consumers feel they are both in a position to influence corporate behaviour, and desire to do so, but lack the facts necessary to make informed purchasing decisions" (ECRA (n.d.), 5).

However, before we simply interpret these efforts as part of the same agenda of individualised choice characteristic of many policy-led sustainability initiatives, we should note that none of these publications have mass-market sales. They tend to circulate among distinct niche markets, targeted at people who are already likely to support certain campaigns or sympathise with certain causes. They are aimed at empowering them to act on the basis of their ethical and political dispositions (see Berry and McEachern 2005). The audience for these publications is, in short, self-selecting. They function as a means of maintaining and extending the mobilisation of people already geared to taking certain dimensions of their everyday consumption as an object of explicit reflection, as well as providing them with informational and narrative resources to help them recruit new supporters from within their own social networks.

ECRA provides information about which products count as ethical and where consumers might find them. This includes: an extensive web-site containing research reports on different sectors, companies and products; a bi-monthly magazine, *The Ethical Consumer*, which was first published in 1989; and the co-published *The Good Shopping Guide*, first published in 2002. *The Ethical Consumer* includes feature analysis of specific types of products produced by different companies, ranging from carpets, clothing, computers, televisions, banks, pensions and investments, all the way to shampoo and butter.

The Good Shopping Guide condenses these sorts of surveys into an easily digestible book-size package. The rationale behind this mainstream publishing venture is clearly stated:

> "By using this book you will discover more than you ever knew about what goes into the goods you buy or are thinking of buying. You will have the information you need to make clear decisions, either to buy the products of progressive and green companies or to boycott those of unethical companies" (Ethical Marketing Group 2002, 11).

ECRA's own understanding of the scope of this sort of publication is quite modest. Rather than assuming that readers do, in fact, shop with these 'scores' in mind, the objective has been to raise awareness of issues and to get people talking, both in everyday life and in more formal public arenas[1].

We have argued that it is better to consider these publications as providing information to existing supporters and sympathisers, as a means of empowering them to 'choose' differently, and more generally to raise awareness and generate debate. The focus on providing information for these purposes is associated with specific understandings of what 'being ethical' actually involves:

> "Ethical consumption, put simply, involves buying things that are made ethically by companies that act ethically. Ethical can be a subjective term both for companies and consumers, but in its truest sense means without harm to or exploitation of humans, animals and the environment" (ECRA (n.d.), 5).

In practice, the evaluations undertaken by ECRA encompass a diverse set of ethical and political convictions. Companies are rated according to criteria which include standards of environmental reporting, pollution records, use of animal testing, recognition of workers' rights, support for oppressive regimes, irresponsible

marketing, and donations to political parties. This form of action is not solely focussed on changing individual consumer behaviour. It is, rather, indicative of a type of 'politics of shame' in which one set of collective actors (campaigns, NGOs, charities) engage with other collective actors (retailers, suppliers, corporations) through the real and discursive figure of 'the ethical consumer'.

This links us to the second aspect of the information politics involved in ethical consumption campaigning. If, on the one hand, *providing information* is deployed as a mechanism for engaging people as 'ethical consumers', that is, as subjects of self-consciously responsible choices, then this effort at mobilisation is intimately connected to the efforts of the same organisations in *generating information about consumers* as a way of mobilising the ethical consumer in wider public debates. There are two modes for mobilising the ethical consumer in the public realm. The first means of making the ethical consumer visible, and in turn of speaking for the ethical consumer, is through the production of numerical survey data showing the actual and potential size of the market in ethically produced or traded goods.

In the UK, one of the most important examples of this approach is *The Ethical Purchasing Index* (EPI), produced by the Co-Operative Bank in partnership with London-based think-tank The New Economics Foundation (NEF). This type of survey data are used to establish the size of the market in ethical goods and services, market share of ethical purchasing, and levels of growth in this sector (see Doane 2001, Williams and Doane 2002). The key sectors measured by the EPI include fairtrade, vegetarianism, organic foods, green household goods and responsible tourism. 'Ethical' is defined for the purposes of the EPI "as personal consumption where a choice of product or service exists which supports a particular ethical issue – be it human rights, the environment or animal welfare" (Williams, Doane and Howard

2003, 7). This definition succinctly illustrates the conflation of changed patterns of consumption with the behaviour of individual consumers, suggesting that the primary agency of changing consumption is that of consumer choice, rather than, for example, changed policies of collective provisioning. In 2003, the EPI also introduced new measures aimed at capturing the value of consumer behaviours that are not strictly based on the purchasing of specific items, such as spend on public transport, buying for re-use, local shopping, and avoidance or boycotting of 'unethical' brands. This reflexive adjustment reflects a concern that the EPI's measurable definition of 'ethical' goods and services might under-count the economic value of ethical consumer behaviour. And in the case of the criteria of local shopping and public transport at least, it also indicates the degree to which the exercise of 'choice' is shaped by systems of collective provisioning over which consumers have little direct influence.

This leads us to the second way of making the ethical consumer visible in the public realm. Survey data are often used to argue that, despite the existing size of these ethical markets, there remain various obstacles and blockages in the way of consumers translating their concerns into effective demand in the marketplace. The 2003 EPI Report acknowledged that, despite impressive signs of growth, the ethical market sector accounted for only 2% of total market share in the UK:

> "Whilst ethical consumers can act as innovators in getting new products to the market, for real progress to be made supply side influences or government intervention may be required for some products to achieve mass market adoption" (Williams, Doane and Howard 2003, 6).

Here, the ethical consumer is invoked as an eager but frustrated subject, a potential but untapped market for retailers, a potential partner in shifting market demand for regulators and policy-makers (see Malpass *et al* 2007).

A primary goal of the production of survey data on ethical consumption markets is the attraction of regular media attention. Media attention is a relatively low cost resource for the sorts of campaign organisations involved in ethical consumption. One of the key objectives of ECRA, for example, is not simply to change people's consumer behaviour, but to raise awareness about a broad range of political issues through the medium of consumer policy and consumerism. This involves not only the publication of specialist publications for supporters, which we have already discussed above, but also the garnering of regular news coverage in newspapers, radio and television. The annual publication of the EPI now gains regular news coverage, as do other similar survey-based research reports. For example, the Co-op's review of its retailing brand, *Shopping with Attitude*, received extensive news coverage in 2004, framed by headlines that identified a trend from "Essex Man to Ethics Man" in the results of its survey of 30,000 people's concerns over safety, propensity to boycott goods and varying degree of willingness to pay more for ethical products. Furthermore, ethical consumption issues have also breached that bastion of utilitarian consumer reflexivity, the Consumer Association's *Which?* magazine. Since 2003, *Which?* has carried regular items on aspects of ethical consumption, for example on waste disposal and recycling in March 2004, and on sustainable consumption in its August 2004 issue. It has also begun to include 'ethical' inserts into its broader reviews of select products – for example "The ethics of the shoemakers" in its June 2003 report on running shoes and trainers, and the "The ethics of making mobile phones" in its December 2003 review of mobile phones.

More generally, there has been a significant increase in the amount of regular news coverage of ethical consumption in the British news media since the early 1990s. Two things stand out about this coverage. Firstly, many of these stories depend upon the types of information generated by surveys and opinion polls. Secondly, this increase in coverage is clearly related to the emergence of a select number of organisations as important and credible sources of news. ECRA is one of these organisations, so too is the Fairtrade Foundation, and the Soil Association, whose annual Fairtrade Fortnight and Organic Food Week, respectively, also attract regular media coverage. These organisations are now 'certified' sources for stories on recycling, energy futures, sustainability, global labour rights and related topics of 'ethical' consumption. For example, in 2004, the leading UK liberal daily paper, *The Guardian*, ran a year-long series in which one of its journalists, Leo Hickman, set out to apply 'ethical' principles to all aspects of his family's household consumption (see Hickman 2005). Two things are notable about this series, the most sustained mainstream media event around ethical consumption in the UK to date. Firstly, the 'experiment' was supported by a set of auditors, from ECRA, The Soil Association, and Friends of the Earth, who regularly advised on the specific issues at stake when it came to, for example, supermarket shopping or loft insulation. Secondly, the series explicitly focussed on the difficulties involved in balancing competing demands to 'do the right thing' with the practicalities of everyday life, seeking to avoid a 'moralising' tone in favour of raising dilemmas[2]. This is indicative of a broader, emergent rationality within ethical consumption campaigning that aims to engage with the range of people's existing dispositions, rather than one that simply preaches to abstracted individuals exercising consumer choice from the moral high ground.

Survey data and consumer information are an important aspect of the emergence of ethical consumption organisations as actors in the public realm, as well as of their more direct engagement with consumers and supporters. The growth of news coverage of ethical consumption issues is indicative of a successful alignment of the activities of campaigning organisations with the conventions and imperatives of professional news production, so that by producing the type of information resource that news organisations *need* – survey data and opinion polls on consumer preferences – these organisations can establish their own *value* as credible sources (see Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993). On the one hand, the steady growth of news coverage about ethical consumption indicates a successful strategy by organisations active in this area in amplifying their cause through media-led repertoires (Freidberg 2004). It also, however, underscores the extent to which these organisations are primarily involved in brokering various sorts of information and expertise amongst different actors, whether these are news organisations, retailers and suppliers, or ordinary consumers.

This second aspect of the politics of information around ethical consumption – making visible and speaking for consumers in the public realm – suggests a specific interpretation of just what type of politics is implied by ethical consumption campaigning. If one looks only at the first aspect of this set of strategies, the provision of information to consumers, and if one ignores the self-selecting quality of the audience for this type of information, it would be easy to conclude that this practice is parasitic on a broader privatisation of responsibility, now articulated through the aggregated preferences of sovereign consumers. And of course, understood in these terms, a straightforward critique of ethical consumption suggests itself: looked at in purely economic terms, the impact of ethical consumption remains only a pinprick on unequal patterns of world trade or the corporate domination of domestic retailing. But

this interpretation only sees half the story. By factoring in the other aspect of the deployment of information – the ways in which information about consumers enables organisations to speak for the ethical consumer as a concerned citizen of the world – a more complex articulation of individual action and collective organisation emerges.

For the organisations behind the growth of ethical consumption, consumer-based activism is an important way of raising awareness about issues and establishing the legitimacy of their own claims and the validity of their own arguments. In the UK, organisations such as Traidcraft, The Fairtrade Foundation, Oxfam, Christian Aid or The Co-operative Group are all active in trying to exert influence over governments and corporations over issues of Third World debt, trade justice, corporate social responsibility and international human rights. Their capacity to act in this way in networks of transnational political advocacy depends on being able to show that they have broad-based popular support for the sorts of changes that they are promoting. A basic objective for any organisation involved in this sort of activism and advocacy is to sustain a constant public presence by demonstrating the *number* of supporters and the *intensity* of their commitment (Tilly 1994). In this light, and given the notorious difficulty of mobilising consumers as political subjects even around 'consumer' issues, using surveys and polls to demonstrate a growth in sales of fairly traded products, organic food or ethical investment is a relatively low-cost strategy available to organisations for performing their legitimacy in the wider public realm, as well as validating themselves to members and supporters. This illustrates the process by which ethical consumption campaigning assembles the disparate practices of anonymous consumers into coherent indices of 'ethical' preferences in the effort to exert normative force over state agencies and corporations. And this implies that it is acts, not identities or beliefs, which matter in mobilising the presence of 'ethical

consumers' in the public realm – acts which can be measured, reported, calculated and represented in the public realm.

Ethical consumption campaigning redefines everyday consumption as a realm through which consumers can express a wide range of concerns and engage in a broad set of projects, including social justice, human rights, development or environmental sustainability. While from one angle it seems oriented towards providing information to consumers in the hope of changing aggregate market outcomes, when one acknowledges the type of audience for this information, made up of supporters and sympathisers, then it looks more like a form of 'individualised collective action'.

In order to better understand the activities of ethical consumption campaigning, we need to break with the assumption that these activities aim primarily to address people as rational economic actors through the medium of information. In the next section, we develop further a rhetorical understanding of the ways in which campaigns provide storylines to argumentative subjects faced with an ongoing set of everyday dilemmas about 'doing the right thing'. We look at the ways in which ethical consumption campaigns often work by re-interpreting one of the most powerful storylines of contemporary political and public discourse, that of 'globalisation'. In ethical consumption, globalisation is presented as simultaneously providing people with opportunities for innovative engagements as consumers just as it also implicates them in an ever expanding range of consequential entanglements.

Globalisation, Responsibility and Empowerment

Ethical consumption campaigning seeks to connect the forms of care and concern already embedded in everyday consumption practices into wider networks of

collective solidarity. This involves a combination of innovative devices such as the shopping guides and purchasing indices outlined above, but also the generation of narrative frames in which mundane activities like shopping can be re-inscribed as forms of public-minded, citizenly engagement.

One distinctive feature of ethical consumption is the degree to which the solidarities and concerns mobilised in such campaigns are relatively de-territorialised when compared with previous examples of consumer activism. Ethical consumption seeks to connect the activities of everyday, domestic social reproduction – shopping, doing the laundry, preparing dinner – to a range of 'big' public issues such as human rights abuses, labour rights, environmental sustainability or global trade justice. This blurring of the public/private distinction (Micheletti 2003) is in turn, we suggest, related to the 'transnationalisation' of responsibilities addressed to the potential subjects of ethical consumption campaigns. The targets of claims-making by ethical consumption campaigns are, however, not restricted to national governments. More often than not, they directly address business corporations or international regulatory institutions. In part, this helps to account for the appellation 'ethical' in the UK, in so far as the motivations and justifications that circulate through these practices tend to be based less on a political vocabulary of reciprocal rights and obligations and rather more on a vocabulary of responsibility, compassion and care. What interests us here is the fact that this explicitly ethical register is articulated as part of a narrative concerning the declining significance of national governments and national politics more broadly.

One key question for the critical analysis of ethical consumption is whether this mobilisation of the figure of the empowered consumer is made in ways that connect with forms of collective, participatory engagement, or whether it wittingly or

unwittingly reproduces a marketised discourse of privatised, anonymous choices. This is an important tension within the broad movement of *consumerised activism* of which ethical consumption is a part (see Littler 2005). A great deal of ethical consumption campaigning takes the rhetoric of the 'hollowing-out' of the nation-state and turns it into an empowering address to consumers to realise their new-found influence. In her guide to responsible action in a globalised world, Anita Roddick, founder of The Body Shop, suggests that "the most powerful bodies in the world, the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank and the International Money Fund, are also the least democratic and inclusive. The result has been a major democratic deficit" (Roddick 2001, 9-10). Having attributed both power and opacity to such international bodies, she turns her attention to multinational corporations and national governments: "Business itself is now the most powerful force for change in the world today, richer and faster by far than most governments" (*ibid*, 76). There is a two-step move involved here: on the one hand, it is asserted that all effective power is now concentrated in the hands of global economic actors, whether businesses or international regulatory institutions; on the other hand, the response to the implied crisis in accountability that follows from this redistribution is already at hand, generated by the very same forces that give rise to the initial problem – people are now empowered *as consumers*.

The argument that power has moved from accountable national governments to unaccountable international bodies and multinational corporations is a recurrent trope in the 'What-to-and-not-to-buy' guides we discussed in the previous section:

> "One of the implications of free trade and globalisation is that we have seen an increase in the power of multinational corporations who, with their huge capital resources, have become nomadic. They are able to move from country to country

seeking out new, more profitable opportunities. Moreover, they are often subsidised by governments keen to encourage capital flow into their countries. Whilst we are witnessing the globalisation of business, we see little evidence of the globalisation of government able to keep control of abuses of economic power. Indeed, there has been a reduction in the role of government in the areas of both economic and social policy, with increased emphasis on the free market as the main mechanism for development" (*ibid*, 4-5).

Like Roddick above, these authors characterise globalisation by juxtaposing capital mobility and reactive governments:

"Large corporations have a significant advantage over governments. They are able to cross borders much more easily. The transnational corporations with their massive stocks of private capital are much more influential on the global stage than any government or even intergovernmental agency can be" (*ibid*, 44).

In terms of the criteria noted above, this type of rhetoric clearly reproduces rather than contests a well-established discourse of globalisation as a clear-cut shift from state-regulation to market-regulation of economic affairs. In these examples, the empowerment of 'the consumer' as an ethical actor is placed firmly within what one might call a 'neoliberal' frame which takes for granted the natural operations of markets, price signalling and the aggregation of preferences. These sorts of accounts seem, then, to confirm Littler's (2005) argument concerning the lack of reflexivity in much of what she characterises as the 'anti-consumerism' movement.

Other organisations adopt a stance in which the individual and collective dimensions of 'ethical' action are not seen as substitutes for one another but are aligned as part of a broad movement of mobilisation in markets, public spheres and formal political arenas. And this involves an alternative interpretation of the discourse

of ‘globalisation’ and its deployment in ethical consumption campaigning. In more activist forms of ethical consumption campaigning, invoking the disjuncture between the global scales of corporations and markets and the national scale of formal political participation is not deployed simply to lament the decline of the nation-state, to bemoan corporate domination or to celebrate the power of the individualised consumer. This disjuncture is deployed, rather, to conjure into view the newly empowered consumer-activist, now able to leverage their purchasing power against corporations potentially vulnerable to ‘no-logo’ styles of political campaigning (Klein 2000). People are addressed in this genre as consumers *and* citizens: as citizens-of-the-world by virtue of their status as consumers.

For example, in the UK this rhetorical framing of globalisation as empowering people as consumers is quite explicit in the activities of ECRA. They attribute the rise of ethical consumption quite directly to globalisation and the de-regulation of markets by national governments which have led to the increasing dominance of ‘unelected’ multinational corporations:

> “Globalisation means that people concerned about social or environmental issues can no longer, in many cases, just lobby their own government for regulatory solutions. The UK government simply has no power to ban child labour in Pakistan or to halt logging in Amazon reserves” (ECRA (n.d.), 4).

But because of this, ECRA claims, campaign groups have increasingly looked for active consumers to put pressure directly on companies and corporations:

> “Globalisation has brought about a huge increase in product choice which has significantly increased the power of consumers in modern markets” (*ibid*).

And in turn, this is used to explain the growth of consumer-oriented campaigning across a diverse range of causes and issues:

> "We are fast approaching the situation now where it is unusual to find a pressure group without some kind of 'consumer awareness' campaign aimed at influencing corporate behaviour" (*ibid*).

The metaphor which is most frequently used to describe this new form of consumer power is that of 'voting':

> "We don't have to feel powerless about the world's problems. Our till receipts are like voting slips – they can easily be used constructively […]. If you care at all, it's really simple to do something about these difficult issues, just by making good choices while you're out shopping" (Ethical Marketing Group 2002, 9).

It is just at this point, when the classically 'political' function of voting seems to have transmuted into an essentially 'economic' function of exercising consumer choice (see Dickinson and Carsky 2005), that the wider articulations of this sort of consumer-oriented activism become visible. Ethical consumption campaigning in the UK tends not, in fact, to present consumer activism as a *substitute* for other forms of political participation. Consumer activism is presented as *supplementing* the repertoire of actions already available to ordinary people to engage with the wider world of power and influence. *The Green Consumer Guide* made this clear when it was first published:

> "Don't forget how important it is to let other people know about the issues. Write to your local newspapers and to the national press. Contact your M.P. And if local issues are your target, get in touch with your local councillors and with the relevant local government department, water authority or central government. Above all, join relevant campaigning or lobbying organisations" (Elkington and Hailes 1988, 4).

Here, we see that ethical consumption in itself is framed as just one part of a broad repertoire of actions that combine elements of what Pattie *et al* (2003) refer to as individual, contact and collective activism. The sorts of 'global feeling' that are mobilised by ethical consumption campaigns aim to sustain collective participation in networks of national and local politics:

> "Ethical buying is not a substitute for other forms of political action. Nor is it necessarily just concerned with individual consumers. 'Ethical purchasing' is, for example, already being organised by clubs, societies, campaign groups, trade unions, private companies, local authorities and national governments" (ECRA (n.d.), 5).

For ECRA, as well as other organisations in the field such as Traidcraft, Friends of the Earth or Labour Behind the Label, ethical consumption is about mobilising churches, schools, Trade Unions and other collective associations, and not just about addressing individuals and privatised households. Campaigns are designed to reach people as members of these sorts of associations and they encourage people not only to shop but also to join, socialise and organise. In a sense then, the identity of 'consumer' is mobilised by these organisations only in order to make available for people various 'pathways to participation' into forms of collective action which are motivated by much 'thicker' forms of identification: as good Christians, as Trade Unionists, as professionals, as members of solidarity networks, as environmentalists, or as residents of particular places.

In this section, we have argued that ethical consumption campaigns and organisations re-inscribe the discourse of 'globalisation' into an affirmative narrative in which people are empowered in new ways through their role as consumers. We have emphasised the narrative qualities of these campaigns to underscore the degree

to which the rationalities of these campaigns aim to provide new resources for the discursive elaboration of self-identity and social practices. There are two dimensions involved in this re-inscription of globalisation. Firstly, it involves a claim that people are now implicated in much more extensive spatial networks of exchange, exploitation and advantage, so that this narrative ascribes to people a much broader range of *responsibilities*: to the environment, to workers in distant sweatshops and so on. But secondly, this ascription of responsibility by virtue of implication in the global market turns out also to provide the medium through which people are told that they are empowered to act on these new responsibilities: as consumer-activists, or perhaps shareholder activists. Understood as one vector of a distinctive strategy which provides 'new ways for people to be' (Hacking 2002), the organisations involved in ethical consumption simultaneously make it possible for people to recognise themselves as *consuming subjects* and as *responsible subjects*; that is, to recognise themselves as bearing wide-ranging, spatially extensive responsibilities *and* the potential for action-in-concert with others by virtue of their capacity to exercise discretion over whether or not to buy and invest in particular goods and services.

Conclusion

Focussing on campaigns and organisations in the UK, we have argued that, in its aims and objectives, and understood as a broad-based movement of organisations, campaigns and supporters, ethical consumption is one example of the reconstruction of contemporary political responsibility in an unequal world (Massey 2006, Young 2004). Ethical consumption can be seen as an example of a new style of political practice in which various citizenly acts are undertaken through the daily practices of

ordinary people (Ginsborg 2005). The growth of ethical consumption can be understood in terms of the production and dissemination by various agencies of a set of 'moral risks' that people are now told they face as consumers – the risk of being implicated in some way in the reproduction of harm to other people, or to the environment, or to future generations. The actors involved in campaigning around ethical consumption are therefore certainly engaged in the moralisation of consumption (see Miller 2001, Hilton 2004). But this moralisation does not simply dismiss consumption as individualistic, acquisitive and self-interested, but rather re-frames it in terms of the collective responsibilities that people are implicated in by virtue of their status as consumers. 'Being ethical' is understood in particular ways in and through this set of practices – in terms of avoiding or diminishing one's implication in the reproduction of harms, for example, and along broadly consequentalist lines that anchor 'responsibility' firmly around an analysis of the intended and unintended consequences of one's own actions.

Miller (1995) has argued that power in the contemporary world is now diffused among consumers. The exercise of this potential in the public realm still depends on the purposeful organisation and articulation undertaken by social movement organisations, non-governmental actors and activist networks. The growth of ethical consumption represents a development within the repertories and strategies of social movements and NGOs more generally. This is not because of some generalised logic of modern mass consumerism. It is because of the strategic choices made by organisations and activist groups to mobilise 'the consumer' in particular ways, faced with various opportunity structures and the availability of different bundles of resources. The problematisation of expanded commodity consumption and the explicit mobilisation of 'consumer' identities are, we have argued, only contingently related.

The mobilisation of the consumer as an 'ethical' subject to be enrolled into various collective projects of solidarity is best explained with reference both to the internal and external dynamics of contemporary contentious politics. Effective activist communication has increasingly adopted a lifestyle vocabulary, anchored in consumer choice, self-image and personal displays of social responsibility (Bennett 2004). Consumer-oriented forms of activism have, then, become modular across different issues and movements. This internal shift in activist repertoires is in turn connected to the emergence of an external political environment in which the rhetoric of globalisation, free markets and consumer choice can be critically re-inscribed to provide new storylines to potential supporters, at a time when forms of political contention are increasingly articulated across national boundaries through various networked spaces.

Our aim here has been to establish that what in the UK, at least, is routinely referred to as ethical consumption is indeed a *political* phenomenon (cf. Micheletti 2003, 158); one that deploys the register of 'ethics' and 'responsibility' in pursuit of some classically political objectives: collective mobilisation, lobbying, and claims-making. Bryant and Goodman (2004), in their analysis of the narratives of conservation-based and solidarity-based networks of alternative consumption, conclude that the potential of these types of practices as forms of 'caring at a distance' are weakened by the uncritical adoption of consumption as the primary basis of action. Our analysis suggests that there is no reason to suppose that there is a zero-sum relationship between deploying the narratives and devices of consumption as a surface of mobilisation and other, more conventionally political modes of action. Quite the contrary, we have suggested that the repertories of consumerism are a means of extending existing dispositions into new areas of practice, and are related to new

forms of public action by organisations concerned with a range of contentious issues. The turn to consumption-based modes of mobilisation, on this interpretation, is partly a response to a search for effective agents of change (Littler *et al* 2005). Furthermore, in these campaigns consumption is emphatically not understood simply in terms of a 'neoliberal' problematic of markets, exchange and choice. Rather, it is understood in terms that link material modes of consumption to the transformation of broader systems and social relations of production, distribution and trade (Murray 2004).

We have argued here that ethical consumption is actively involved in 'globalising the consumer'. Ethical consumption is a movement distinguished by advocacy-type organisations that specialise in the production and dissemination of information, knowledge and narrative storylines, and which are embedded in transnational networks of labour solidarity, environmental advocacy, trade justice and related issues. Deploying these resources, these organisations endeavour to articulate *consumption* and *the consumer* through a register of 'ethics' and 'responsibility' that seeks to configure people as political actors embedded in networks of global action. But it is important to note that the political rationality of ethical consumption campaigning does not either aim for or require the complete overhaul of people's identities as 'ethical consumers'; it aims to be responsive to emergent dispositions and structures of feeling, translating these into forms of collective, concerted action (Soper 2004). If ethical consumption has any effect in producing new actors in the public realm, this need not take the form of fully formed, embodied elaborations of the self at all. It is more properly thought of in terms of the production of various *singularities* – a purchase, an investment, a donation – that can be registered, recorded and re-iterated through other circuits of communication.

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Notes

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