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The Ethical Turn in Commodity Culture: Consumption, Care and the Other

In a small courtyard at the University of Melbourne, there is an unprepossessing, somewhat makeshift looking outdoor café called KereKere. The coffee on offer is organic, Fair Trade, Rainforest alliance-branded and sustainable: a list of options we've increasingly come to expect even in corporate café chains such as Starbucks. But at this café, customers are also asked to decide how the profits from that sale are distributed every time they buy a coffee. As customers are handed their order, they are also presented with playing cards that allow them to choose from a list of causes where the café's profits will go. The café thus operates in the spirit of 'kerekere', a Fijian custom in which a relative or neighbour can request something that is needed and it must be willingly given with no expectation of repayment. The café's young ethically minded owner sees this process as fostering 'a culture that promotes community wellbeing'.

At this café, the traditional economic exchange associated with the purchase of a cup of coffee has been subtly moved into other territories through the introduction of questions of gift giving, and of responsibility, care and even love (as we see here, the café's logo is a coffee cup with a series of hearts rising from it) into the exchange ritual. Such attempts by social justice-oriented businesses to reconfigure the privatized moment of spending as a communal act, thus positioning consumer choice as a site of responsibility, are increasingly commonplace in today's marketplace. No longer purely associated with fringe politics or hippie lifestyles, terms such as 'ethical' and 'responsible' shopping and 'conscience consumption', are increasingly entering into the everyday language as well as the shopping experiences and practices of so-called 'ordinary' consumers.

The notion of ethical consumption encompasses a wide range of practices and political stances—from radical anti-consumerism to much more accommodationist approaches, such as buying 'green' products but not necessarily reducing your rate of consumption. In this article I provide a broad overview of the turn to ethical consumption, focusing on how a growing global

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consciousness of the impact of contemporary consumerism has manifested itself within popular media culture. Locating this increasing awareness within the context of broader shifts in the nature of social identity and citizenship and, in particular, the rise of 'lifestyle politics', I discuss the potentials and limitations of a consumer-based ethics. As I argue, one potentially progressive aspect of the rise of 'guilt-free' shopping is a growing concern within mainstream consumer culture with issues of 'care, solidarity and collective concern' (Barnett et al. 2005a: 45). In other words, the way in which the privatized act of consumption has become foregrounded as relational, as linked to and impacting on various 'others'. At the same time, as I suggest, such a move is characterized by major limitations, including a tendency to focus on 'Northern' consumers as empowered agents at the expense of producers, and to privilege a privatized and choice-based approach to consumer politics.

The ethical turn within popular culture

An important backdrop to the rise of consumer anxieties about the ethics of commodity culture has been the increased focus within popular media culture on the impacts and risks of capitalist modernity, particularly in relation to the environment. The global success and impact of Al Gore's An Inconvenient Truth and youth-oriented 'green' entertainment spectacles such as Live Earth has heralded the growing coverage of green issues by popular media.

The 'greening' of mainstream media has been accompanied by a range of critical commentaries on materialism and 'affluenza' in wealthy developed nations and popular cultural critiques of over-consumption, such as that offered up in the 2004 film Super Size Me. In these popular texts, over-consumption in countries like the US is increasingly linked to the impact on 'others'—whether on endangered species, the environment, or on producers in developing countries who have found themselves mono-cultivating products for distant, western consumers while facing their own local issues around food scarcity.

The rise of ethical consumption thus connects to a broader popular critique focused on a range of concerns around environmentalism, anti-materialism, and unsustainable lifestyles. More specifically, though, the emergence of 'the ethical consumer' as a recognised term in media and consumer culture has been linked to the strategies used by Fair Trade campaigners. Clive Barnett

and his team of cultural geographers in the UK, for instance, have done extensive work on the mainstreaming of ethical consumerism (Barnett et al. 2005a; Barnett et al. 2005b). They argue that Fairtrade strategies have been particularly effective as they have focused on consumers as active agents, privatized, informed citizens able to 'make a difference' in the lives of others through conscious, considered acts of responsible consumption.

Marketers not surprisingly have also jumped on the ethical bandwagon, concerned with exploiting the cultural shift towards 'affirmative purchasing'. As an educated, affluent and highly desirable consumer demographic, ethical consumers are increasingly targeted, for instance, by a range of ethical lifestyle-oriented publications such as Sublime, self-described as the first international sustainable lifestyle magazine 'with ethical values and intelligent content'. In the model of ethical consumption held up by marketers, 'self-gratification is no longer defined in opposition to civility' (King 2006: 38). The emergence of ethically-branded products and the expansion of ethical markets means that shopping can be increasingly tailored to consumers' broader moral and political concerns around caring for others and the environment.

This mainstream turn it could be argued is hardly a radical one—accommodating rather than challenging the logic of consumer capitalism, ethical consumption can be seen as, at best, alleviating the guilt of consumers in the global north for the deleterious effects of their high impact lifestyles and, at worst, merely creating a new market niche. One area where the ethical turn has arguably offered a more fundamental critique of consumer culture, however, is the recent focus on the global geography of commodity production and consumption, or what is termed the commodity chain. For instance, there has been growing academic interest in mapping commodity chains, with geographers in particular working to expose the connections between consumer practices in the global north and often increasingly distant production processes.

As Hughes and Reimer discuss in the introduction to their edited collection Geographies of Commodity Chains (2004), this critical concern with revealing the production processes behind consumption has occurred not just in academic circles but has also seen a growing popular interest in the 'social lives' of commodities.

The recent flurry of films such as Black Gold ('As westerners revel in designer lattes and cappuccinos, impoverished Ethiopian coffee growers suffer the bitter taste of injustice') and

popular exposés such as the book Bitter Chocolate: The Dark Side of the World's Most Seductive Sweet speak to a growing concern among political activists and consumers alike regarding the provenance and the politics of the goods they buy. A BBC documentary series Blood, Sweat And T-shirts in which six young fashion addicts travel to India to live and work alongside Indian garment workers, making clothes for British high-street stores likewise highlights the politics of consumption—in this case by putting northern consumers literally in the shoes of the (usually invisible) southern producers on whom they depend for their cheap, high street fashion. As the website spruiking the show states: 'Find out whether they could handle a sewing machine and meet the target of two garments a minute. And whether their experience changed their throwaway attitude to clothes shopping'. Adopting the same kind of reality-style format, the series was followed by Blood, Sweat and Takeaways in 2009, which highlighted issues in relation to food production in Asia, and Blood, Sweat and Luxuries in 2010, which focused on the production of luxury goods in Africa.

In both these popular and academic critiques, the commodity chain approach adopted reveals the hidden geographies and hidden others embedded or masked within the social relations of contemporary consumption. One of the major emphases here is on the political clout of the informed consumer—who is portrayed on shows like Blood, Sweat and Takeaways as potentially having a significant impact on the lives of the people who labour to produce goods for the global north, a relationship that has been captured by the phrase, used by cultural geographers, 'caring at a distance'. This notion of caring for distant others is a recurrent theme in the marketing strategies behind ethical brands and products such as Fairtrade. A 2008 advertisement by Fairtrade in the UK, for instance, features three images of consumers enjoying goods produced around the world (a cup of coffee, a slice of pineapple, a fashionable teeshirt) while in the background we see images of smiling producers in their home countries harvesting coffee beans, pineapples, and cotton. The textual anchor next to these images further reinforces this link between consumer practices and the lives of distant producers:

Picking products with the FAIRTRADE Mark means farmers and workers in developing countries can improve their future. Picking products with the FAIRTRADE Mark means farmers and workers in developing countries can improve their future.

Here the Fairtrade advertisement seeks, in part, to address the growing length of commodity chains and the increasing disconnection between consumers and producers that has accompanied the globalization of commodity production. Consumers are asked to imaginatively reconnect their shopping practices to the lives and production practices of farmers and workers, the latter personalized here through the smiling faces of the workers depicted in the advertisement. Through making the often hidden parts of the commodity chain visible, we see a degree of defetishization occurring here in relation to commodities (to borrow Marx's notion of commodity fetishism and his emphasis on the alienation from production that he argues accompanies capitalist labour processes). As we saw on Blood, Sweat and Takeaways, popular representations of ethical consumption often involve re-connecting 'fetishised' high street commodities back to the labour of the producer, and, relatedly, calling on consumers to recognize the sources and impact of their shopping practices.

From individualization to life politics

Alongside this broader ethical turn within the popular realm, the growing emphasis on responsibility and questions of conscience in consumer culture can also be linked to shifts in the nature of social identity and citizenship and, in particular, the rise of what I am terming here 'lifestyle politics'. Though today's ethical consumption practices can be grounded in a longer history of political activism around consumer issues, I would argue that what has been crucial to the recent mainstreaming of ethical consumerism is its integration into lifestyle culture and its articulation with some of the dominant modes of late modern agency, particularly those associated with (the intertwined) issues of risk and self-governance. Of central concern here is the way in which we are increasingly seeing the individualization of issues once marked as broadly social and political, so that questions of politics and citizenship are more and more tied to personal and domestic lifestyles and to an ethics of choice.

One area in which we have seen this process played out is through the focus on risk today. Conceptions of risk (both personal and collective) have come to play an important role in shaping identity and everyday life practices in late modern societies. In The Risk Society, Ulrich Beck argues that we have moved into an era of reflexive modernization, a key feature of which is a

preoccupation with managing risk, here 'defined as a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself'(Beck 1992: 21). Two elements of Beck's risk society hypothesis are particularly relevant to understanding the turn to ethical lifestyle practices: firstly, his suggestion that the management of risk not only occurs at a societal level but is increasingly individualized via the figure of the reflexive self; and secondly (and relatedly), his argument that risk has flattened out or equalized social experience to a certain extent.

Beck's work on individualization and reflexivity points to the way in which global risk is increasingly experienced and managed at a highly personal and privatized level. By individualization, here, he means 'first, the disembedding and, second, the re-embedding of industrial society ways of life by new ones, in which individuals must produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves' (Beck 1994: 13). In other words, for Beck, people's personal biographies are becoming free floating and no longer grounded in the fixed categories of social identity, such as social class, family, gender, or occupation, that once organised modern life. People's ways of living or lifestyles, then, are increasingly shaped not by tradition and community but by individual choice, and as I discuss below, by a growing sense of personal responsibility.

Linked to this argument is the suggestion that social experience is now less shaped by old structural determinants and categories and more by an awareness of communal, national and global concerns, such as the impact of climate change. For Beck, social hierarchies and distances between others are breaking down in today's global risk society as the experience of external risk (and reflexivity) becomes a generalized one. As he quips, '[p]ollutants do not spare the drinking water of directors general' (Beck 1998: 25).

This growing sense of the generalized and interlinked experience of risk has seen a focus on the responsibilities of individuals in managing and optimizing their lifestyles, not only on behalf of themselves but also on behalf of others. As Nikolas Rose has shown in his work (1989; 1996), in late liberal, capitalist societies, processes of governance are increasingly centred around the self-managing consumer–citizen, with 'the government of conduct' increasingly operating 'on a territory marked out by the vectors of identity, choice, consumption and lifestyle' (Rose, 1996: 344).

Influenced by Foucault's conception of modern power and governance as being played out through the 'freedoms' associated with liberal selfhood, Rose argues that the rise of neoliberal

governments in many nations in the 1980s (in particular the UK and US), alongside the emergence of a wider 'enterprise culture,' has seen a shift in the dominant paradigms through which we conceptualize modern citizenship. In particular, the figure of the self-governing citizen, an individual who is constructed as enterprising and self-directed, has become a cultural dominant. This has occurred in the context of the state increasingly seeking to devolve questions of social and political responsibility to individuals, families and communities, a shift that has contributed—along with other developments—to the emergence of new forms of citizenship and agency. Thus, in neoliberal settings, the rise of the ethical consumer movement can, in part, be seen as a result of the gap left by the state as it passes on responsibility for what would once have been public or governmental concerns, such as the regulation and labeling of consumer goods, the prevention of sweatshop conditions for workers both locally and off-shore, and the monitoring and regulation of potential environmental hazards etc., onto consumers themselves.

While the growing 'ethicalization of existence' under advanced liberalism (Rose 1989: 263-264) has been largely read in governmental terms, that is, in relation to its potential for regulating the citizenry, my interest here is also with understanding the way in which Beck's and Rose's observations about late modern selfhood might also speak to the rise of a new sense of political agency, one tied to what Giddens describes as 'life politics' (1991). The rise of life politics, as Giddens sees it, positions the self not just as a site of external discipline. The reflexive nature of identity instead suggests a malleable self, able to be adjusted in ways not purely tied to controlling techniques of governmentality but also to new forms of agency. Ironically, then, even though questions of life and biopolitics are increasingly played out in the realm of the abstracted, codified knowledges produced by late modernity and governmental bureaucracies, at the same time they challenge the internal referentiality of these systems by continually returning us to ethical concerns about ourselves and our relations to others. In other words, late modernity is characterized by a complex dynamic between abstraction and systematization on the one hand and the messy specificity and affective experiences of individuals, households, and communities on the other.

All these conceptual contexts for understanding contemporary agency, that is, Beck and Gidden's observations on reflexive selfhood and privatized risk, and Rose's Foucauldian-inflected understanding of ethicalised subjecthood point to a mode of citizenship that cannot purely be

understood in terms of reductive conceptions of individualization but rather speaks to the thoroughly social and communal nature of the reflexive, ethical self. What I am arguing here, then, is that the figure of the ethical consumer cannot just be understood within a model of selfish and/or rational individualism, or privatized citizenship, but rather emerges out of a more complex social, cultural and political conjuncture, one that is characterised by a growing inter-connection between personal life choices and community, national, and global concerns.

Consumer-citizenship in an era of 'post-politics'

Linking the rise of the individualized society with questions of citizenship, in this last section I want to briefly locate the politics of ethical or caring consumption within broader debates around the rise of a lifestyle-based mode of politics. In the process, I touch on some of the possibilities and the limitations of ethical consumption as a model of civic agency. While the notion of citizenship has been traditionally associated with the formal structures of the state and with organized politics, scholars such as Nikolas Rose and Aihwa Ong have pointed to a fundamental transformation in the nature of citizenship today. The new citizenship, Ong argues, is characterized by governance regimes 'concerned less with the social management of the population… than with individual self-governing' (Ong 2006: 501). While many have read such shifts as markers of neoliberalism conservatism, others have interpreted such trends rather more positively. For instance, Swedish political scientist, Michele Micheletti (2003) argues that—in what she terms a 'post-political' world—we are seeing the rise of a range of new forms of micro-political and lifestyle-based modes of civic agency and citizenship based around people's personal lives and relations with others. Viewing the growing role of lifestyle politics or 'sub-politics' from a European social democracy perspective (rather than from the vantage point of Anglo-American neoliberalism), for Micheletti, the rise of political and ethical questions around consumption 'encourages, empowers, and allows citizens to take more responsibility for their personal and collective wellbeing' (2003: 9), a process she sees in terms of 'individualized collective action' (29). Shopping practices (such as the rise of farmers' markets) that take into account questions of responsibility for, and a desire for a connection with, the makers of consumer products reflect a growing awareness of the way in which individual consumers are embedded in a wider set of social relations. Rather than representing the triumph of selfish individualism and the ultimate privatization of politics, then, the ethical turn in

mainstream consumer culture can, on the contrary, be read as increasingly being marked by collective concerns.

This rather more positive perspective on consumer-citizenship sits alongside a range of recent debates by scholars concerned with rethinking political citizenship and civic agency in order to account for the ways in which peoples' everyday lives today are increasingly embedded in questions of civic values and concerns around social responsibility (Dahlgren 2006; Couldry 2006). These reconfigurations of political form and practice complicate oppositions between public issues, citizenship, and private interests, suggesting that processes of so-called individualization are, as I have suggested, thoroughly embedded in community and the social. Indeed such shifts indicate that the individualized, 'lifestyled' self is increasingly the preeminent site through which social and political concerns are increasingly worked through. According to this view, rather than reflecting the decline of civic culture, the rise of consumer-driven politics can be seen instead as heralding 'increases in various forms of lifestyle politics' (Bennett 1998: 745), forged at the level of everyday 'interpersonal bonds' and 'micro-mobilization' (Carty 2002: 132).

For many critics though, the refiguring of consumption as a site of individual ethical and political engagement has been regarded as diminishing rather than enabling civic agency. US cultural commentators, such as Lauren Berlant, see such developments as '[d]ownsizing citizenship to a mode of voluntarism' (1997: 5), while others argue that civic responsibility has been reframed in terms of, and thereby reduced to, a matter of individual choice, 'self-realization', and the 'stakeholder society' (Pringle & Thompson 1999: 267), a process that has occurred at the expense of state care and conventional understandings of civic participation and citizenship.

Critics also point to the limitations of a politics defined by and through the logics of the market. Activist and Guardian journalist George Monbiot, for instance, has little time for what he sees as the superficial platitudes of ethical consumption which, to his mind, encourage people to continue consuming while simply replacing less 'caring' products with others. 'It does not matter whether we burn fossil fuels with malice or with love', he writes (Monbiot 2007: 4). For others, such as British scholar Jo Littler (2011), ethical consumption can also be seen in part as a panacea for middle-class guilt or, worse still, as a way of acquiring and displaying cultural capital—with smug, well-heeled middle class families showing off their conscience consumption-credentials through

conspicuous forms of green and ethical consumption, such as positioning Fairtrade goods in prominent spots around the home.

Relatedly, while the media exposés discussed above can be seen as offering a critique of commodity fetishism, Fairtrade adverts and TV programmes like Blood, Sweat and Teeshirts tend to privilege bourgeois, first world consumption as a site of agency. Indeed, in their article on geography and global food 'The world on a plate', Cook and Crang (1996) argue that the focus on provenance and distant 'others' in the marketing of such foods produces a double commodity fetishism—with 'the other' positioned as a passive and often exoticised commodity. Here undue weight is given to the ability of first world consumers to understand and impact the 'realities' of life for producers in the global South – an emphasis that also tends to reinscribe rather than undo the colonizing power relations between (agentic) Northern consumers and (passive) Southern producers.

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In conclusion, the ethical turn in consumption is a complex social, cultural and political phenomenon, emerging as it does out of, and in articulation with, a range of broader contexts. The rise of ethical consumption, as I have shown, can be seen as part of a wider shift in the popular media and cultural landscape toward making visible the impact of the lifestyle and consumer practices of the global North on a variety of 'others', both human and non-human. The consumer-citizen addressed within these popular ethical discourses has emerged out of, and is linked in turn to, broader shifts in the nature of identity and citizenship today, in particular the rise of forms of 'individualisation' shaped by a strong sense of risk and responsibility. Questions of citizenship and political agency have thus become radically reframed within a model of social and civic relations that increasingly focuses on the conduct of the self and on domestic and personal lifestyles.

Rather than automatically assuming, as many commentators have done, that such a micro-politics involves a downsizing of citizenship, I have argued here for a focus on both the limitations and potentials of a lifestyle-oriented politics. As I have suggested, the popular turn to ethical consumption has to a certain extent refigured the act of shopping away from its usual narrow association with materialism, excess and selfish individualism to a broader focus on questions of

impact and care, both in terms of the human others involved in the commodity chain and also the environment. The focus within popular commodity ethics on taking control of one's consumption and on re-articulating once alienated consumer practices to more active, engaged modes of what might be seen as 'lifestyle activism' positions the consumer-citizen not just as an individualized, privatized subject but as an active ethical player in social relations.

One of the dangers of such an approach, however, is that there can be a tendency to displace responsibility from governments and corporations on to individuals while effacing the local and global political-economic determinants that structure people's daily lifestyle 'choices'. In this context, the ethicalization of lifestyle choice can be seen to reinforce a profoundly apolitical 'doctrine of personal responsibility' (Miller 2007: 120), an ethos that fits well with dominant neoliberal trends towards devolved and deregulated governance and trade. Linked to this abdication of responsibility on behalf of the state is a tendency to blame and shame consumers for the ills of global capitalism, as we saw on Blood, Sweat and Teeshirts. As I suggested, the flip side of this focus on 'caring consumption' is the privileging of middle class western consumers as active social agents while positioning producers and workers in the global South as passive recipients of their care and goodwill—a process that involves a kind of double fetishisation and 'othering' of those at the other end of the commodity chain.

Such limitations point to the need to move away from linear models of the commodity chain that position the sovereign western consumer at one end and the producer at the other. More complex models, involving commodity circuits or networks, offer approaches that focus on the role of a range of social actors and players, including producers themselves and institutions—government and non governmental agencies, other policy actors and corporations (Hughes & Reimer 2004). Such a move places structural issues of power and inequity back into the equation, while still focusing on questions of action. Finally, agency here becomes centred not on sovereign individuals but on networked relations, creating an ethics of consumption that encompasses a range of human and non-human actors and practices in the construction of commodity relations.

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