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Consuming ethics: Articulating the subjects and spaces of ethical consumption

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CONSUMING ETHICS:

ARTICULATING THE SUBJECTS AND SPACES OF ETHICAL CONSUMPTION

ABSTRACT

Geography's debates about how to maintain a sense of morally responsible action often emphasize the problematic nature of caring at a distance, and take for granted particular kinds of moral self-hood in which responsibility is bound into notions of human agency that emphasise knowledge and recognition. Taking commodity consumption as a field in which the ethics, morality, and politics of responsibility has been problematized, we argue that existing research on consumption fails to register the full complexity of the practices, motivations and mechanisms through which the working up of moral selves is undertaken in relation to consumption practices. Rather than assuming that ethical decision-making works through the rational calculation of ethical obligations, we conceptualise the emergence of ethical consumption as ways in which everyday practical moral dispositions are re-articulated by the policies, campaigns and practices that enlist ordinary people into broader projects of social change. Ethical consumption, then, involves both a governing of consumption and a governing of the consuming self. Using the example of *Traidcraft,* we present a detailed examination of one particular context in which self-consciously ethical consumption is mediated, suggesting that ethical consumption can be understood as opening up ethical and political considerations in new combinations. We therefore argue for the importance of the growth of ethical consumption as a new terrain of political action, while also emphasising the grounds upon which ethical consumption can be opened up to normative critique.

1. Distance, Knowledge and the Motivation of Responsibility

In geography's debates about ethical and political responsibility, responsible action is often conceptualised in terms of an opposition between place and space. Place is understood to be the location of clear-cut ethical commitments, while space serves as a shorthand for abstract, alienated relations in which distance intervenes to complicate and extend the range of moral duties. The exemplary topic for geography's recent 'moral turn' has therefore become the recurrent theme of caring at a distance, revolving around the question of whether concern for people in close proximity can be transformed into "a spatially extensive beneficence, in the sense of actively caring for more *distant others*" (Smith, 2000, 93, emphasis added; see also Silk, 1998; Smith, 1994, 1998; Corbridge, 1993, 1994, 1998). These discussions are framed by the assumption that caring at a distance is a problem, in need of either explanation or justification. These arguments seem to imply that caring up close, as it were, is much less of a problem.

There is, then, a widespread and taken-for-granted assumption that spatial distance can be thought of in terms of a barrier, beyond which the reach of responsibility becomes problematic in a way that is assumed not to function in relations of proximity: "distance leads to indifference" (Smith 2000, 93; see also Chatterjee 2003). For geographers, the distinction between intimate proximity and alienated distance is productive precisely because it enables a claim to be made for the relevance of their discipline. The empirical observation of the interdependence of spatially disparate activities is often presented as the key foundation for an expanded ethics of extended responsibility appropriate for a globalised world. In turn, geographer's discussions of the spatial scope of moral action often posit a taken-for-granted consequentialist theory of ethics, in which the contribution of geography as a discipline is premised on a claim that knowledge of distant contexts is a prerequisite for responsible action. 'Space hides consequences' thereby becomes the basic premise of a model of critical analysis in which reconnecting the separated moments of production, distribution and consumption is meant to restore to view a previously hidden chain of commitments and responsibilities. The attraction of this model of analysis, of course, is that it supports a distinctively geographical pedagogy. One key conceptual device in this new moral-empirical pedagogy is the notion of the commodity chain. This concept serves as the basis for elaborating an implicit moral theory of commodity consumption, in which commodification is understood to work in terms of generalised mis-recognition (e.g. Castree 2001, Hartwick 1998), and geography itself becomes a means of learning re-cognition as morality as such. Geography, in short, becomes the knowledge of chains of consequences.

There is, then, a broad understanding in the social sciences of geographical distance as a problem: a problem for empirical knowledge; a problem for establishing causality; and by extension, a problem for maintaining a sense of morally responsible action. In turn, robust empirical knowledge and rigorous explanatory theory are presented as the essential media of recognition that promise to restore the lost intimacies of care sundered apart by commodification and bureaucratisation. Our starting point in this paper is that this sort of understanding of the relationship between geography, knowledge, and responsibility takes for granted a particular model of moral self-hood. According to this model, people are implicated in their actions by reference to a linear chain of relations between free will, knowledge, voluntary action, causality, responsibility and blame. Responsibility, in short, is tightly bound to a particular notion of human agency (see Barry 2000). There are two related problems with this model of moral agency. On the one hand, by focussing on

the responsibilities of individuals (rather than various collective actors) that follow from their being knitted into a myriad of connections, it produces an excessively stringent account of ethical conduct. On the other hand, by privileging knowledge as the key factor motivating responsible conduct, it tends to underplay a range of other considerations that might play a role in shaping people's dispositions towards others and the world around them. In this paper, we want to develop an argument about the relationships between consumption, ethics and political action that starts from the assumption that there is no good reason to suppose that spatial distance necessarily diminishes either a felt responsibility or practical capacity to care for others, and that nor is there a need to suppose that caring 'up close', in local contexts, somehow involves a transcendence of social distance (Cloke *et al*, forthcoming). Starting from the assumption that all social relationships are mediated ones (see Miller 2001), we set out to re-conceptualise the grounds upon which to evaluate the growth of practices that explicitly aim to reconfigure ordinary practices of commodity consumption as sites of ethical transformation and political agency.

2. What are the Ethics of Ethical Consumption?

As already indicated, consumption has a central place in geography's considerations of morality, ethics, and responsibility (see Sack 1988, 1992, Sayer 2003). In current research, the linkage between consumption and ethics has been developed along two lines. Firstly, by virtue of occupying a pivotal position in the extended network of contemporary commodification processes, consumption comes to serve as a privileged entry-point for thinking about political and ethical responsibility (e.g. Hartwick 2000). Work on commodity-chains has emphasised the variable historical-geographical 'careers' of commodities as they pass through production, distribution, and consumption. As we have already suggested, critical accounts of the politics of commodification rest on an analytics of mis-recognition, according to which responsible political action requires the development of geographical imaginations, or cognitive maps, that connect spatially and temporally distanciated actions and consequences through the provision of explanatory knowledge. This is likewise a strong undercurrent in work on the ethical dimensions of global commodity-chains, in which ethical trade initiatives are understood to rest on changing the patterns of knowledge-relations within distanciated networks of interaction (Hale 2000, Hale and Shaw 2001, Hughes 2001).

Secondly, in a line of work that asserts the active and creative dimensions of consumption, consumption is also constructed as so many practices of identity-formation in which ordinary capacities for autonomous action and choice are routinely exercised (e.g. Jackson 1999, Gregson and Crewe 2002). Research in sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and human geography has demonstrated that everyday commodity consumption is a realm for the actualisation of capacities for autonomous action, reflexive monitoring of conduct, and the self-fashioning of relationships between selves and others (Miller 1995; 1998). The strong emphasis of cultural research on consumption is upon asserting and re-asserting the skilled, active role of consumers in consumption processes.

At one level, these two approaches seem to have almost diametrically opposed ethical and political sensibilities. In one, consumption is a realm of fetishized mis-recognition and alienation, while in the other consumption is understood as a realm of self-realisation. But at another level, what they share is a model of moral self-hood that turns on the possession of coherent knowledge – either knowledge about the consequences of spatially extended processes, or the reflexive self-knowledge

required to construct and reconstruct identity. It seems, then, that it is extremely difficult to approach the topic of consumption without touching upon contentious issues of how to reconcile autonomy and responsibility, individual agency with collective obligations. This is because the historical development of systems of commodified social reproduction and of associated consumer cultures inevitably generates a set of questions about the relationship between how people want to live and how society should be organised (Slater 1997, 3). In a sense then, consumption and consumerism are inherently 'ethical' or 'moral' realms of social practice (see Wilk 2001).

  With this in mind, it is noteworthy that over the last two or three decades, there has been the emergence of initiatives and movements campaigning around such issues as fair-trade, corporate social responsibility, and sustainable consumption. This is, in turn, reflected in the increasing role of ethical considerations in shaping consumer behaviour (see Durning, 1992; Newholm, 1999). It is this family of activities that we refer to here as 'ethical consumption'. The economic importance of the rise of ethical purchasing for corporate strategy, retailing, and policy makers is well established and likely to grow. But just what counts as ethical consumption is itself open to some debate. On the one hand, ethical consumption might be defined in relation to particular *objects* of ethical concern. In this sense, consumption research defines a variety of issues as 'ethical', including environmental sustainability, health and safety risks, animal welfare, fair trade, labour conditions, and human rights. On the other hand, this focus on consumption as a means of acting in an ethical way toward particular objects of concern extends across various forms of *practice*, including shopping, investment decisions, and personal banking and pensions. The diversity of objects and practices that might constitute ethical consumption is underscored by considering the diversity of organisational forms that might be defined in this category. These include ethical trading organisations (e.g. Oxfam, Traidcraft, Body Shop); lobby groups (e.g. the Soil Association); fair trade campaign organisations (e.g. Oxfam, Christian Aid); co-operative movements (e.g. such as the Co-Op in the UK); consumer boycott campaigns (e.g. anti-Nestle, Stop Esso); and 'no-logo' anti-globalisation campaigns (e.g. against Nike, Gap, McDonalds, etc). Even this short list indicates the high degree of overlap between organisations, the diversity of strategies and issues adopted, and the variability of scales at which ethical consumption activities operate. What we are interested in exploring in this paper is how best to conceptualise the ways in which ethical consumption, broadly conceived, can be understood as a set of practices which mobilise a diverse range of motivations, incentives, and desires in developing large-scale forms of collective action that are able to induce meaningful change in the patterns of conduct of powerful economic and bureaucratic systems.

  As testament to the growth of ethical trading and ethical consumption initiatives, there is a burgeoning literature in economics and management studies on business ethics and corporate social responsibility. This work understands ethical consumption primarily in terms of the role of information as the medium through which the ethical preferences of consumers and the ethical records of businesses are signalled in the market place (e.g. Bateman *et al* 2002). From this perspective, the development of appropriate informational strategies (marketing, advertising, labelling, and branding) will assist in overcoming market failure. This dual set of assumptions - that providing information to consumers regarding the conditions of production and distribution of commodities is central to changing consumer behaviour, and that knowledge is also the key to putting pressure on corporations and governments - also underwrites the

political rationalities of consumer-oriented activism and policy, such as fair trade campaigns, sustainable consumption, and ethical trade audits, in which publicity is understood as a primary means of acting on the conduct of both individualised consumers and corporate actors alike.

The strong assumption connecting all of fields of research noted above – on commodity-chains, on consumption and identity, and on policy and consumer activism - is that individuals are morally implicated in their actions through dimensions of knowledge and ignorance, recognition and mis-recognition. Existing research on consumption therefore depends on relatively narrow conceptualisations of ethical decision-making by consumers, companies, and public organisations (see Barnett, Cafaro and Newholm 2005). Consuming 'ethically' is understood in both theory and practice to depend on dimensions of knowledge and information, and on explicit practices of acknowledged commitment. One implication of this, we will argue below, is that ethical consumption practices often work through registers that, while outwardly universalistic in their ethical and political claims, are related to routines of differentiation, discrimination, and distinction. As a result, the politics of consuming ethically might not be so straightforward as is sometimes supposed.

3. Articulating Ethics and Consumption

We want to outline an alternative conceptualisation of the relationships between consumption, commodification, and the dynamics of ethical action that can account for the variety of ways of being ethical and political which, we have suggested above, are not allowed for by existing approaches. Rather than assuming that ethical consumption is a self-reflexively conscious practice set off against non-ethical consumption, we start by assuming that everyday consumption practices are always already shaped by and help shape certain sorts of ethical dispositions. We propose that everyday consumption routines are *ordinarily ethical*. If 'ethical' is taken, in a loosely Foucauldian sense, to refer to the activity of constructing a life by negotiating practical choices about personal conduct, then the very basics of routine consumption – a concern for value for money, quality, and so on - can be seen to presuppose a set of specific learned ethical competencies. These competencies make up what one might call the habitual, practical dimensions of consumption (Hobson 2002). Furthermore, as Andrew Sayer observes, commenting on Daniel Miller's ethnographic accounts of everyday consumption behaviours in North London (Miller 1998), these illustrate "how far shopping is directed towards others, particularly family members, and how far it is guided by moral sentiments towards them and about how to live. Far from being individualistic, self-indulgent, and narcissistic, much shopping is based on relationships, indeed on love. It often involves considerable thoughtfulness about the particular desires and needs of others, though it may also reflect the aspirations which the shopper has for them, thereby functioning as a way of influencing them" (Sayer 2003, 353).

Given this sense of the ordinarily ethical dimensions of shopping and other routine consumption practices, we conceptualise the emergence of ethical consumption as a field of marketing, campaigning, and policy-making by which the ordinary, practical moral dispositions of everyday consumption are re-articulated by policy-makers, campaigning organisations, and businesses. The key issue then is how the ethical dispositions already implicit in routine consumption become the object of explicit policies, campaigns, and practices of 'ethical consumption'. One implication of this conception is that it suggests that the success of such strategies depends on developing campaigning materials and modes of address that are sensitive to the

experiential horizons of ordinary consumers. Understanding ethical consumption along these lines implies that it refers to any practice of consumption in which explicitly registering commitment or obligation towards distant or absent others is an important dimension of the meaning of activity to the actors involved (Howard and Willmott 2001).

Following this understanding of ethical consumption campaigns, policies, and marketing strategies as aiming to transform the patterns of self-cultivation which are practised through routine engagement with commodities, we want to suggest that ethical consumption can be conceptualised as a form of *action-at-a-distance*. This follows from thinking about just what we mean by 'consumption'. There are two dimensions to this. Firstly, rather than thinking of consumption as a distinctive realm of social practices, offset against production or distribution, we follow Warde's (2004) practice-based conceptualisation, according to which consumption is "a process whereby agents engage in appropriation, whether for utilitarian, expressive or contemplative purposes, of goods, services, performances, information or ambience, whether purchased or not, *over which the agent has some degree of discretion*" (emphasis added). On this definition, consumption appears to be related to exemplary 'liberal' practices, where this is understood in terms borrowed from Foucauldian inflected ideas about governmentality and governing-at-a-distance. These ideas refer our attention to the idea that individual dispositions to choose are not the expressions of natural dispositions, but are worked up, governed, and regulated by an array of actors who make possible certain forms of individualised conduct.

Secondly, consumption as a version of action-at-a-distance can be thought of in explicitly spatial terms. The sites of commodity consumption are multiple and dispersed (Jackson *et al* 2000), and they are not therefore subject to tight, detailed disciplinary forms of social regulation. The spatialities of consumption therefore imply that the power-relations constitutive of consumption are fundamentally indeterminate, in so far as they are unforced (Barnett 1999). As a result of both of these factors – the high degree of discretion built into consumer markets and the dispersed geographies of commodity consumption - attempting to influence the consumption habits of myriad actors depends on a series of highly mediated strategies for governing complex assemblages of individual conduct, collective action, technologies, spaces, and discourses. On this understanding, the power relations constitutive of ethical consumption practices rely upon deploying distinctively cultural forms of 'government', such as practices aimed at the cultivation of moral consciousness, of self-control, and of self-display (Barnett 2001). Understood along these lines, consumption can be understood as one of the key sites of ethical self-formation in the contemporary period of 'advanced liberalism' (Miller and Rose 1997). It serves as a key arena in which people are made-up as selves who can exercise freedom and responsibility by realising their capacities to choose, where these are understood as a realisation of innate, private right of individual autonomy.

It is from this perspective that we want to approach the rise of ethical consumption. It is worth noting that consumer activism that connects everyday consumption behaviour with the pursuit of explicit moral and political values is hardly a new phenomenon. However, it is not necessarily the case that the politicisation of consumption always and everywhere takes the form of mobilisation of social actors as 'consumers' (Trentmann 2003). In this respect, fair-trade campaigns, anti-sweatshop boycotts, and so on, are notable precisely because they do mark a phase in the politics of consumption that explicitly works to configure social subjects as consumers. Strategies of ethical consumption are, therefore, ambivalently implicated in a broader

process of generalising a particular model of what it is to be ethical. This model combines an emphasis upon individual choice with a sense of responsibility to others, so that ethical action is easily defined in terms of a *choice made to accept a widened scope of responsibility* towards both human and non-human others and to act upon that acceptance through one's identity as a consumer.

This brings us to the idea that the growth of ethical consumption can be understood by reference to the idea of 'moral selving' (Allahyari, 2000, Cloke 2002). Moral selving refers to the mediated work of creating oneself as a more virtuous person through practices that acknowledge responsibilities to others. Moral selving might take the form of explicit performances, or displays, of virtuous conduct. But it also refers to a range of more humble, perhaps even anonymous modes of conduct. In the rest of this paper, we want to explore the ways in which ethical consumption practices can be understood as everyday devices through which various actors explore how to motivate other-regarding ethical action by working on people's self-regarding considerations. We want to ask what sorts of ethical conduct and moral-selving are actually encouraged by regulated and self-consciously 'ethical' consumption behaviour. It is our contention here that by assessing the ways in which ethical consumption actually works, it is possible to discern a more complex sense of the multiple rationalities of ethical action that campaigns and practices of ethical consumption actualise in different combinations (see Radley and Kennedy 1995).

There are two dimensions to ethical consumption practices that recommend a critical re-interpretation of the motivations and practices of these sorts of self-consciously ethical conduct. First, there is an organisational dimension, referring to the strategies used by campaigning organisations, policy makers, and businesses to facilitate the adoption of ethical consumption practices by consumers. This dimension therefore involves *governing consumption*, where this refers to an array of strategies that aim to regulate the informational and spatial contexts of consumer 'choice'. For example, these include market research and marketing (Maxwell 1996), advertising (Leslie 1999), regulating access to credit (Leyshon and Thrift 1999), the growth of social and ethical auditing (Hughes 2001), as well as the dissemination of the discourse of consumerism more generally (Du Gay 1995). These sorts of practices can be thought of as so many devices for turning oughts into cans. At the same time, the emergence of certain practices, devices and technologies for acting ethically at a distance itself generates new responsibilities by enabling new forms of action.

Second, there is an inter-subjective dimension, referring to the forms of self-hood that ethical consumption practices enable people to cultivate in their everyday lives. This dimension involves *governing the consuming self*, where this refers not to attempts by collective actors to directly manipulate the conduct of social subjects, but to the various practices of the governing oneself in and through consumption, of making ones own life a project of self-cultivation. In one sense, ethical consumption practices can be understood as a means of cultivating particular forms of social distinction by overtly displaying one's ethical credentials (Gregson and Crewe 1997, May 1996). However, defining moral selving simply in terms of self-display risks oversimplifying the complex self-other relations which can be involved in governing the consuming self. More specifically, we foresee that some such governing will be aimed at a going-beyond-the-self, in a deliberate attempt to achieve degrees of selflessness in order to practice responsibilities to distant others.

By emphasising these two dimensions of ethical consumption – the governing of contexts of consumption and the governing of the consuming self – we want to underscore the irreducible dimension of mediation involved in the working up of

ethical consumerism as a field of social action. If one holds that any assertion of an obligation also requires a practical capacity to act on that obligation, that is to say, that *ought* implies *can*, then what is interesting about ethical consumption is that it involves a set of procedures which simultaneously interpellate individuals as subjects of obligations in the very moment of also providing the practical means of realising this obligation. The structure of address implied by the distinctive 'buy this' of ethical consumption campaigns depends upon the mediated working up of a range of both moral responsibilities and registers of action. In this sense, then, ethical consumption can be understood not so much as the means of translating abstract ethical values into practical conduct, but rather in terms of the ways in which practices *articulate* specific ethical competencies. We are drawn to the idea of the articulation of consumption and ethics because it moves beyond the limitations of the prevalent informational understanding of ethical consumption in policy, business, and much academic work as well. According to this understanding, if consumers are provided with the correct information about what goes on before a product reaches the supermarket – who was a commodity made by, under what conditions, how much were workers paid, was the production process environmentally sustainable, and so – then they will adjust their consumer behaviour accordingly. This model has its attractions – it does point to the sense in which different sorts of devices, defined broadly as above, make it possible for ordinary people to act on felt senses of responsibility and obligation. However, this informational model also dissembles the extent to which ethical consumption practices do not simply aim to facilitate the practical realization of already existing but somehow frustrated ethical commitments, but are part of broader projects which aim to transform self-understandings of wants, needs, desires, and satisfactions. The notion of articulation combines a sense of connecting consumption and ethics – of enabling oughts to be practically acted upon as cans – with a stronger sense of 'speaking' the ethical consumer, which emphasizes the idea that ethical consumption does not simply bring to light already existing ethical dispositions, but it might well invent new ones.

4. Shopping for Responsibility: The Example of Traidcraft

No single organisational case study can illustrate the diversity of strategies, concerns, devices and performances embraced by the government of consumption and the governing of the consuming self. Indeed, it is clear that any organisation will simply form a small part of much wider networks by which involvement in consumption performs some kind of caring at-a-distance by virtue of the relational agency of diverse actants (Whatmore and Thorne, 1997). What follows, therefore, should be read in the context of an acknowledged need for considerably more research with ethical consumers on these issues. However, a brief examination of one particular context in which self-consciously ethical consumption is mediated allows us to provide a grounded example of how governing consumption and governing the consuming self can lead to an articulation of specific ethical consequences. What kinds of practical devices are addressed to the consumer? In what contexts and in what network forms are these devices inculcated? What kinds of performed practices emerge, and in what ways do such practices reflect or display a caring "beyond the self" or "at a distance"? The example we want to consider here is that of *Traidcraft*. Branding itself as "the leading fair trade organisation in the UK" *Traidcraft* was established in 1979 in order to sell a range of fairly traded products in the UK as a way of "apply[ing] in a practical way, the love and justice found at the heart of their own Christian faith" (Traidcraft, N.D.; http://www.traidcraft.co.uk), although despite

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its overtly Christian foundations, *Traidcraft* "welcomes co-operation with all who share a concern for fairer trade". By 1981, the initial emphasis on importing crafts was expanded to include foodstuffs, and subsequently the range of products had grown, embracing fashions, beverages, paper and cards. Initial sales of around £1 million in 1982 have been increased to over £12 million in 2003, with notable growth over the last five (and particularly the last two) years, as the fair-trade environment in the UK has become generally more sympathetic.

Traidcraft is founded on heavily emphasised ethical credentials aimed at fighting poverty through trade, and involving the payment of fair prices to people in the 'Third World', the granting of fair credit to suppliers where needed, and the establishment of partnership with suppliers in order to work together for a better future. This broad ethos is demonstrably linked with a re-articulation of the ethical dispositions of UK consumers through a discourse of 'creating opportunities': "Traidcraft is working to change this injustice by creating opportunities – for the poor in the "third world" to work their way to a better quality of life and for people here to join a movement for change that's working for the fairer conduct of international trade" (www.traidcraft.co.uk/mainwindow3). 'Creating opportunities' to 'join a movement' has involved the establishment of a series of practical devices designed to shape the repertoires of ethical conduct within its spheres of operation. Thus *Traidcraft* is set up as two interconnecting organisations offering different ranges of device by which consumers can 'join a movement'. First, *Traidcraft Exchange* is the charitable arm working to promote fairer trading systems and to raise awareness about fair trade issues. Campaigning activity has included integral support for the Trade Justice Movement, a coalition of leading voluntary groups, charities and non-governmental organisations and trade unions, which aims to provide information to UK consumers and to enrol them in particular campaign set-pieces such as the establishment of an annual Fair Trade Fortnight. Second, *Traidcraft plc* is the trading company, working to provide consumers with the opportunity to 'connect' with 'third world' producers via the purchase of ethically traded products. These activities have involved specific discursive articulations of what is 'acceptable' for the UK market place - necessitating both a training of producers to supply marketable products, and a training of consumers to accept new fairly traded brands; *Traidcraft* was a leading member of the consortium which launched *CafeDirect* as an archetypally 'fair trade' coffee in 1991, to be followed by other brand promotions, notably *TeaDirect*, *CocoDirect* and *Geobars*. The branding of these products emphasises the strong ethical intention inscribed in their development – cutting out unfair trading by 'middlemen' through 'direct' connections that link up across different spaces ('geo'), and articulate a caring for distant others.

Although our main emphasis here is on the ethical repertoires of selling and buying, it is important to emphasise the interconnections between *campaign* and *trade* that the *Traidcraft* example illustrates. This relation is demonstrated by the huge success of a new *Traidcraft* catalogue launched to coincide with Fairtrade Fortnight in March 2003 (sales were lifted to levels usually only experienced in the pre-Christmas period), by the use of Fairtrade Fortnight to launch the new cranberry Geobar; and by a recent campaign by Trade Justice Movement which invited consumers to detach the FAIRTRADE mark from the wrapper of any purchase and attach it to a provided postcard to the Prime Minister (see Figure 1). In this way, individual acts of buying are directly connected to wider practices of campaigning. This common device of providing a ready-made vehicle for individual protest mediates between the individual

consumer and a more corporate ethical movement, thus bringing together a localised purchase with a nationwide campaign, and ultimately with international forms of care.

Organisations such as *Traidcraft* serve to articulate the contexts of consumer choice, and to mediate consumer conduct by providing opportunities and practical devices through which ethical conduct can be shaped. These devices operate at varying scales. An online web-store and associated mail order catalogue provide nationwide access to *Traidcraft* products and the ethical caché carried by them. More locally, *Traidcraft* products are made available through fair trade shops around the UK and key product placements have been achieved in leading supermarkets, as well as in smaller health and wholefood shops. However, the mainstay of *Traidcraft's* local operations is a network of neo-volunteer representatives - or "Fair Traders" – who organise the sale of products in their church, workplace or community centre and to family, friends and neighbours (strictly speaking, representatives are not volunteers because they are paid commission on sales, but simply donate commission to Traidcraft Exchange or pass it on to consumers in lower prices, and in most cases the level of commission earned is insufficient to prompt participation as a business opportunity). These local representatives are aided by a flow of carefully regulated information with which to conduct local talks, establish local events and initiatives, and even answer difficult questions raised by sceptical consumers. Fairtraders thus serve as local agents in the process of articulating consumer choice, not only representing committed activists seeking to influence other consumers, but also personally modelling the government of the consuming self and displaying the kinds of dispositions and competencies expected of an ethical consumer.

Traidcraft's network of 'Fair Trader' representatives is itself a fascinating device for intermediary reinforcement of repertoires of consumption at the local level. The seemingly simple task of ordering in and selling Traidcraft products actually becomes a dynamic search by representatives for innovative practices, niches and opportunities to get the message, and the products, across. For instance a typical representative, working principally, say, within the setting of a local church, is likely to deploy a range of practical devices which enable people to buy fairly traded goods. A permanent table or trolley can be used to establish a served or self-serve Traidcraft outlet for periodic use in the building. Regular monthly shopping orders can be assembled for collection or even delivery. Other individuals can be enrolled to supply products into their workplace. Irregular special events (pre-Christmas markets, cooking demonstrations, fashion shows, arts and crafts events, school tuckshops, and so on) can be staged which provide opportunities to sell goods and get the message across. More ambitiously, a fair trade café or shop can be established. In each of these cases, the labelling of spaces and events as fair trade transcends the mere buying and selling of goods by presenting an opportunity for intermittent or regular 'joining the movement', through the re-articulation of existing ethical dispositions. The resultant repertoires of ethical conduct require continual re-articulation and reinforcement as particular devices suffer from performative fatigue on the part of both consumers and the representative. However, the organisational mediation by Traidcraft and its local representatives provides a constant government of ethical consumption in these spheres, and provides many consumers with their principal channel of acting ethically in relation to fair trade.

The argument of this paper is that organisational strategies such as those deployed by *Traidcraft* serve to place policies, campaigns and especially practices of ethical consumption before consumers in such a way that the resultant practical opportunities serve to govern the consuming self, in a process whereby caring for distant others is

achieved through the cultivation of care of the self. These devices both articulate an ethical obligation ('I ought to'), and provide a practical means of translating this into actual conduct ('I can do'). In so doing, they contribute to the broader re-creation of the self as more virtuous, ethical, or spiritual. Ethical consumption, then, is intimately wrapped up in the inter-subjective tactics of governing the consuming self, and is likely to involve elements of performance amongst consumers. We would emphasise here that consumer responses to these inter-subjective tactics vary widely. For example, although it might be assumed that operating within local networks such as churches might benefit from interconnecting commonalities between faith and charity, predisposing a benevolent awareness of distant strangers and a willingness to engage in practices of care, in practice such networks consist of a very wide variety of ethical consumers. Some drinkers of fairly traded coffee do so as part of a wider repertoire of ethical and political action, while for others, that jar of coffee can be their sole display of ethical concern, and for yet others participation in church-based trading, however "ethical", is anathema to sabbatarian theology. As a result, consumer responses to Tradecraft devices are unpredictable, especially in terms of the overt display of ethical credentials. Amongst a community group such as a church, some people will readily embrace the devices provided, while others may accept the broad idea but for a variety of reasons be reluctant to change individual practice on that basis (common reasons given for non-participation include that goods are too expensive, or are of insufficient quality or 'taste', and that fair trade campaigning should not be a core priority in a church setting). Even those who do engage with the practical opportunities of buying fairly traded goods from Traidcraft do so as part of widely varying strategies that stretch from fervently loyal support (which can be overt or covert) to a more tokenistic doing-of-the-right-thing. Nevertheless, as an illustration of ethical consumption in action, it is possible to illustrate four dimensions through which the performative practices of ethical consumption can be linked to the mediated repertoires provided by Traidcraft and its intermediary representatives. Each dimension is distinguished by different levels of intensity of personal engagement and by differing temporal and spatial scope of interactions involved.

First, there are moments in the home when the credentials of fair trade consumerism can be displayed. These illustrate the micro-performances of ethical consumption, in the most intimate contexts of inter-subjective interaction. Here it is not unusual for consumers to emphasise their purchase of, for example, fairly traded tea or coffee, by verbal confirmation that this is, indeed, Cafedirect (or equivalent); by the deliberate use of a commodity in its original packaging rather than decanted into a more ubiquitous container; by deploying supplementary merchandising, such as Traidcraft or Cafedirect mugs; or even by displaying posters or other related images on kitchen cupboard doors or pinboards. Such practices perform both the product, and the underlying message; they invite social distinction, and tell visiting friends that I/We have 'joined the movement' and are engaged in caring for distant strangers; they confirm the inter-subjective tactics of consumption as personally performed campaigning, and as moral selving, and the emphasis tends to be on positive performative display rather than a more reflexive admission of the limitations of ethical consumption. Equally, the home can be a site of moral surveillance by visiting friends, whose sneaky look, or even outright interrogation (to see what coffee you use, for example), marks out territories of sameness, or otherness, collective social distinction or perceived 'dodgy' ethical practice. Alternatively the discovery of *non*-consumption of fair trade produce can spark outpourings of mutual resistance, often revolving around a distaste both for the apparent imposition of ethical

correctness, and for the style / taste / positional impact of the particular product(s) concerned. And in each of these cases, the performance of ethical consumption is, of course, intimately bound up with the reproduction of class and gender relations within and between domestic spaces.

Secondly, and along similar lines, the workplace can become an arena of colonisation and contest in terms of key repertoires of ethical conduct. Social relations in this sort of context are more formalised, but nonetheless, opportunities for the sorts of inter-subjective interactions noted above also exist. Frequently, the self-adoption of opportunities for ethical conduct vis-à-vis fair trade can lead to a desire to become an advocate for that conduct in associated communal territories such as the workplace. Again, coffee drinking provides a useful illustration. For those with authority over the provision of communal resources for coffee/tea breaks, the deliberate use of evidently fairly traded products such as *Cafedirect* and *Teadirect* makes both personal and generic ethical statements about caring for distant strangers, statements which are then performed publicly in shared locations. Where such authority needs to be sought, however, potentially more contentious displays can occur. The communal acceptance and performance of ethical credentials may be more difficult in circumstances such as the workplace, in which the criteria for moral selving may be even more diverse than, for example, in the context of a church, and where the cultural disciplining of communal response to suggested devices is lax by comparison. Individuals in these circumstances may be reduced to personalised performed practices, such as bringing in their own fair trade coffee, or very deliberately ordering fair trade products when going out to coffee with work colleagues. These performances and potential contests can involve attempts to govern (or at least to shame) the consuming other as well as reinforcing the governing of the consuming self.

A third moment of performative practice associated with the devices and repertoires inspired by Traidcraft is in the giving and receiving of cards and gifts. In this case, the forms of power and influence exercised are less direct, more obviously mediated in both time and space. The pre-Christmas season marks the most hectic and productive time of year for Traidcraft, reflecting a clear recognition that consumption associated with the giving of presents and cards holds both economic and ethical significance. The sending of 'charity' Christmas cards has boomed over the recent years permitting seasonal greetings to be accompanied by another kind of message, relating to the support by the sender of a particular 'good cause'. By deliberately entering the card / wrapping paper markets, Traidcraft have facilitated the good cause of fair trade to be inscribed on the sending of greetings. Equally, their original product-emphasis on craft from 'Third World' producers is typically connected with the pre-Christmas practices of buying and sending presents. Traidcraft's craft range will often be labelled, so that the receiver will be able to associate the gift with fair and ethical trade. Accordingly, the gift (as well as the card and paper), conveys a display of ethical credentials which reflect back on the giver, and articulate their performed care for distant others. Now of course the products concerned will themselves carry with them aspects of design, material or subject that convey the unusual and often the exotic with which to bring delight to the receiver. We are not suggesting, therefore, that the purchase of Traidcraft gifts is entirely self-messaging on the part of the giver. However, the giving of gifts does represent a key moment for performative practice in this context, and reflects a key time-space site in which the expression of charity has become something of a cultural expectation and is therefore ripe for the enlisting of ordinary consumers into broader projects of social change.

Finally, the special events organised as part of localised repertoires of ethical conduct provide moments of corporate performance which are again shaped by organisational strategy and resources, and inter-subjectively consumed as part of the governing of self within a wider corporate body. These are examples of interactions that address potentially broader, and relatively anonymous, publics than the forms of interpersonal interactions so far discussed. The Christmas markets, fashion shows, arts and crafts exhibitions, cookery demonstrations and so on permit a focal fair trade label to be applied generally to the events of church - and of wider communities. At these events, the accompanying live music, children's play, opportunities for good-humoured congregation and so on, all add to a sense of collective virtuous performance under the banner of Traidcraft. Although some will assess the success of such events in terms of the money raised, and thus connote meanings of charity to the rather different idea of trade, others will review their participation in terms of the raising of consciousness and the feel-good response to ethical credentials associated with fair trade and facilitated by Traidcraft. In these various ways, the organisational strategy of providing practical devices that facilitate practices of ethical consumption have shaped the context of collective events. Without the specific mediating activities of Traidcraft, such events (and the other moments described here) would not have occurred in their current form.

This final example, with its attention to ethical consumption as a form of collective action, allows us to address the question of the relationship between ethical consumption and what is ordinarily understood as 'politics'. There is a persistent temptation to decry the 'ethical turn' in recent social science and humanities research as a turn away from politics. In contrast, we would argue that the growth of ethical consumption is indicative of new ways of understanding the relationships between collective action, personal and inter-subjective conduct, and social change. Firstly, a great deal of what counts as ethical consumption is carried out in the name of quite explicitly political beliefs – this is most obviously the case with boycott campaigns. In these and other cases, consumption is rendered ethical by being constructed as a realm in which closely held political beliefs are put into routine, everyday practice. This is not necessarily always the case – for example, in other contexts ethical consumption might be constructed in terms of faith-based commitments. But secondly, and more broadly, the political dimensions of ethical consumption can be gleaned by recognising the extent to which this is a form of social action that is, indeed, collective, organised, and which involves high levels of conscious mobilisation. In discussing in detail the mediating r*ole of Traidcraft* in presenting devices by which consumers can perform forms of ethical conduct, we have wanted to suggest that any clear boundary between ethical action and political action is scrambled by the emergence of ethical consumption processes. By simultaneously focussing upon the *provision of devices* and the *performance of codes* of ethical display in different interactive settings, we have shown that ethical consumption stretches all the way from highly personal forms of conduct and interaction, often undertaken in quintessentially private spaces, to more expansive forms of anonymous public communication. As we suggested, *Traidcraft* illustrates the emergence of practices in which regulated but individualised practices of buying and consuming are directly related to collectivised practices of joining, mobilizing, lobbying and campaigning.

5. Consuming Ethics and the Politics of Ethical Consumption

In conclusion, we want to reiterate our argument that the growth of ethical consumption campaigning is suggestive of new forms of practice through which unequal power relations are constituted, reproduced, and contested. Ethical consumption is one set of practices through which new networks of global solidarity are currently being constituted (Renard 1999). However, by asking the question of what sort of ethics is presumed by ethical consumption campaigns and policies, we have been concerned explicitly to raise the problem of what sorts of power are operative in this field. Ethical consumption works through a set of subtle interpellations that turn upon ambivalent forms of inducement as well as the provision of practical devices that enable action. These are not the forms of address normally privileged in discussions of moral responsibility or political obligation, both of which tend to depend on abstract understandings of autonomy, knowledge, and recognition. At the same time as asserting the political significance of the growth of ethical consumption, we therefore also want to underscore the argument that the meanings of 'being ethical' associated with ethical consumption practices are themselves open to critical analysis. This implies that there may be a basic contradiction between the means and ends of ethical consumption, in so far as the practical devices through which an ostensibly universalistic responsibility is made possible is also a means of socially and cultural differentiating certain classes of persons from others. In terms of the analytical distinction between governing consumption and governing the consuming self made earlier in this paper, there are two dimensions to this tension between different moral imperatives that inheres within the practices of ethical consumption. Firstly, governing the contexts of ethical consumption involves the manipulation of various *practical devices* that effectively facilitate the adoption of self-consciously ethical consumer behaviour (e.g. direct debits, brand awareness, mail ordering). Access to these sorts of mechanisms is, one can reasonably suppose, socio-economically uneven. Likewise, in so far as ethical consumption involves an explicit marking of commitments, then governing the consuming self depends on various sorts of *performative practice* associated with being an ethical consumer (e.g. shopping, giving, wearing, eating, drinking, displaying, protesting). The socio-cultural and economic resources necessary to engage in these sorts of practices are, one can also reasonably suppose, unevenly distributed across lines of class, gender, race and ethnicity. Thus, both the material and socio-cultural resources required for engaging in self-consciously ethical consumption are differentially available. In so far as ethical consumption involves both governing consumption through various practical devices, and the performative cultivation of social distinction through the display of ethical credentials, then the acknowledgement of the uneven capacities for this sort of practice opens a space for a critical analysis of the forms of ethical disposition that ethical consumption practices reproduce.

The conceptualisation of ethical consumption developed in this paper throws up some troubling questions not just for the practicalities of ethical consumption campaigns, but for the basic normative aims and objectives of such activities themselves. Using consumption as a medium for enrolling people into wider projects through the register of 'ethics' leads to the prevalence of a particular model of ethical responsibility and personal obligation. The contemporary articulation of ethics and consumption configures the ethical subject in distinctive ways. In particular, running ethics through consumption might lead to a predominant understanding of responsibilities and obligations in terms of individual choice. The growth of ethical consumption marks a significant new moment in a broader history of consumer

activism, one in which large numbers of people are explicitly mobilised in support of various political causes through a shared identity as consumers, but where the spatiality of this mobilisation exceeds the scale of the nation-state. If consumption is, as Miller and Rose (1997) have argued, one of the key practices through which models of individual subjectivity as a modality of choice are currently assembled, then ethical consumption is, in a certain sense, parasitical on this broader array of processes. It might then be a means through which people consume particular conceptions of what it is to be ethical – ones that turn upon notions of *accepting* ones responsibilities and obligations. On this understanding, ethical responsibility remains a form of benevolence, reproducing a set of oppositions between active consumers and passive recipients. Apart from anything else, this construction might well militate against the effective maintenance of networks of solidarity (see Traub-Werner and Cravey 2003).

Our reason for emphasizing the mediated practices and performances through which ethical consumption campaigns work is to suggest that there lies within them a potential for thinking of ethical commitment in terms of *assuming* rather than accepting responsibility – that is acknowledging a responsibility to act to address wrongs for which one is not strictly, in a causal sense, liable for or to blame (Barnett 2004). This sense of excessive responsibility is important precisely because, as Iris Young (2003) has argued in outlining a revised model of political responsibility, it is what enables scenes of individual consumption to be articulated with campaigns which demand not only individual responsibility but broader forms of collective accountability. The informational model of sustainable and ethical consumption which is prevalent in many policy circles as well as in some varieties of consumer activism has the effect of flattening power relations by presenting responsibility as falling equally on individualised actors. As our example of *Traidcraft* suggests, other forms of consumer-oriented activism and campaigning present a model of responsibility that connects individual and household consumption to broader mobilisations. In this way, a narrow sense of individualised ethical responsibility is transformed into a practice of collective, political responsibility. There are two dimensions to the practice of political responsibility articulated through ethical consumption. Firstly, in practical terms, they connect up routine everyday activities (like shopping) to more formal practices of campaigning. Secondly, in discursive terms, they represent individualised actions as part of a collective project that demands responses and imposes obligations on corporations, governments, and regulatory agencies. In conclusion, then, we think that the question of whether the devices and registers of campaigns and policies configure self-consciously ethical consumers as benevolent agents of individual choice, or as potential agents of collective mobilisation capable of responding to demands for political responsibility, provides an important benchmark against which to evaluate the practical outcomes and normative claims of different version of ethical consumption.

Trader to inform some of the illustrative material in the paper. The responsibility for what is written remains firmly with the authors.

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