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1 Introducing ethical consumption

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In a small courtyard at the University of Melbourne, there is an unprepossessing, somewhat makeshift-looking 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. Operating 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 sees itself as fostering ‘a culture that promotes community wellbeing’.

Figure 1.1 A chalk stencil of the KereKere logo on a pathway at Melbourne University, by Andrew Acton.
The diversity and breadth of populist manifestations of concerns about contemporary materialism and overconsumption points to the limitations of definitional approaches to ethical consumption, and the problems inherent in attempting to draw boundaries around a ‘field’ that touches upon everything from questions of North-South consumer-producer relations, to concerns with buying locally, to issues of sustainability. As we discuss below, the emergent scholarship around ethical consumption likewise reflects the inchoate nature of the ‘field’, with work in the area drawing upon and moving between political economy, geography, sociology, cultural studies, business studies and sustainability studies. Among other things, the tendency towards an intermixing of theories and methods here reflects a healthy recognition of the need for an object- or practice-centered approach to mapping the rise of ethical practices and concerns within consumer culture, rather than privileging the often limited logics of any particular disciplinary or theoretical rationale.

Such an approach also reflects a shift in how the ethical is conceived in recent scholarly work. Foucault’s location of ethics ’in regimes of living’ (Collier and Lakoff 2005) and self-governing has influenced a range of articulations that do not understand ethics in terms of external moral codes and values, but instead ground ethical practice in the terrain of the everyday: the networks of relations in which we each catch up. This is what Gay Hawkins refers to as ‘the ubiquity of ethical work’ (2000: 13), which requires a variety of methodologies to track and analyze its multiple and situated manifestations.

Having highlighted these definitional difficulties, one shared point of commonality that arguably marks the various practices and concerns framed within the ethical consumer turn is the growing politicization of lifestyle and lifestyle practices. Michel Feher notes that this expanding realm of non-governmental activism is forcing a redefinition of what counts as politics today, highlighting too the ‘open-endedness of the political process’ (2007: 26), which is no longer limited to the classical sphere of the public defined against the private or household. Collier and Lakoff describe how this distinction, a traditional basis for moral philosophy, is no longer tenable in the contemporary world, where ‘living’ has been rendered problematic’ by a host of concerns around the regulation of life itself, from genetically modified humans and crops to climate change (2005: 22).

Given this political context, why are we using the term ‘ethical consumption’ rather than, say, ‘political consumerism’ to label this trend? To part this is purely to reflect the popular currency of this term beyond the realm of academia. But we also want to signal something of a shift in the nature and status of consumer concerns today. While, as we discuss below, there are clearly strong links between ethical consumption and political consumerism, we suggest that it is useful to make connections to, but also distinctions between, what has traditionally been associated with political consumerism – forms of activism, ‘boycotts’, consumer organizations, etc. – and more recent forms of responsible or conscience consumption, which we would see as being particularly oriented to the contemporary moment and its problematization of living. In the following two sections then, we will briefly discuss the development of political consumerism before turning
Historicizing political consumerism: from boycotts to brands

While the mainstreaming of ethical consumption is a reasonably recent phenomenon, it can clearly be linked to a range of longer-term struggles around consumer politics. As Humphrey notes in this collection, the mass market has long been the subject of political and cultural critique by Marxist, liberal and conservative critics alike. Likewise consumer culture has been marked by active political struggles since its beginnings. Here, boycotts can be seen as some of the earliest forms of political consumerism. In the eighteenth century, for example, during the American War of Independence, consumers refused to buy English goods as a way of breaking free from English colonialism. Thus, private consumer experiences were converted into public rituals, as ‘neutral’ consumer items such as imported British tea and clothing became politically charged objects.

One of the more important examples of organized political campaigning around consumption was the US White Label Campaign of 1899, driven by the women’s consumer leagues that had first developed in the UK in the late nineteenth century and subsequently spread to the US and Europe. Initiated by middle-class women concerned with the conditions of workers, these consumer leagues worked to compile white (as opposed to black) lists of products and department stores associated with good labor practices. Representing an early example of ‘boycotting’ and an antecedent to the kinds of practices employed by Fair Trade and No Sweat campaigns today, the White Label Campaign took over from these earlier ‘white lists’, with campaigners positively labelling the products of factories that passed the League’s inspection. It was during this period, too, that corporations began to take notice of consumer dissent and an increasing suspicion of corporate practices. The visible social impacts of the industrial revolution were met with new forms of corporate philanthropy, such as the trusts dedicated to social reform established by Joseph Rowntree in 1904 (Frankenthaler 2001: 29).

Negative modes of campaigning in the form of boycotts also continued through into the twentieth century, with ‘Don’t buy where you can’t work’ campaigns for black civil rights impacting on the hiring practices of firms like Woolworths in the US during the 1920s–1940s. As Naomi Klein points out (2000: 336), one of the more recent boycotts and the first case of global brand-based activism was the targeting of Nestlé (1974–84) by various consumer, church and worker groups in response to its marketing of infant formula in Africa and Asia, which the company pursued despite medical research which pointed to its associations with higher infant mortality when compared with breast milk. What the Nestlé case also signalled was the shift towards a different kind of political activism around consumerism. Nestlé was targeted because it was a highly visible corporation. Not only was it the largest multinational to make infant

formula, it also had a particularly strong brand presence and promoted itself along the lines of ‘family values’, making it especially vulnerable to attack on this issue.

One of the central arguments Klein makes in her book No Logo (2000) is that the mainstreaming of political consumerism today is integrally connected to the centrality of brand culture. As she explains, global anti-consumerist movements have been around since the 1970s, yet the shift towards an everyday mode of ethical consumerism has ironically been enabled by the rise of branding as a central corporate strategy and the growing presence of corporate brands in everyday life. While contemporary branding has enabled corporations to seamlessly integrate themselves into spheres of life that were once relatively free of market logics, as Klein argues, the flip side of brand strategies that position corporations as good, responsible citizens is that they are increasingly being held to account for their social responsibilities to customers and the community at large. The culturally and socially imminent nature of the brand today is thus at once both the strength and the Achilles heel of the contemporary corporation. While Klein links the anti-globalization movement and its highly visible forms of activism to the rise of brand culture, the more ordinary, everyday politics associated with ethical consumer practices today can be linked clearly to the simultaneously ubiquitous and quotidian nature of brand culture.

The mainstreaming of ethical consumption

Aside from Klein’s argument regarding the centrality of the brand, the distinctive quality of what counts as political consumerism today – and in particular its integration into the consciousness and shopping habits of ordinary consumers – can also be linked to a range of other contemporary developments. One important context for the ethical turn in mainstream consumerism has clearly been the increased focus within popular media culture on the impacts and risks of capitalist modernity, particularly in relation to the environment (Lewis 2008). The global success and impact of Al Gore’s An Inconvenient Truth (2006) alongside youth-oriented ‘green’ entertainment spectacles such as Live Earth has seen the growing coverage of green issues by popular media.

Marketers and advertisers have been quick to jump on the green bandwagon, increasingly embracing the language of corporate responsibility and incorporating green rhetoric and imagery into media-marketing strategies, a trend that has in turn seen rising concerns about corporate ‘greenwashing’. Closely linked to and overlapping with environmental critiques of modernity, a range of critical commentaries on materialism and ‘affluenza’ in wealthy national societies (De Graaf et al. 2005) have recently made their presence felt in the mainstream cultural landscape, from media interest in anti-consumerist activism around corporate practices (particularly the targeting of major transnational corporations (TNCs) like Nike and McDonald’s) to popular cultural critiques of over-consumption, such as that offered up in the 2004 film Super Size Me.

The rise of ethical consumption thus connects to a broader popular critique focused on a range of concerns around environmentalism, anti-materialism and
un Sustainable Lifestyles. Barnett et al. also contend that Fair Trade organizations and campaigns played a central role in the mainstreaming of eth ical consumption, using strategies such as survey data to actively work to mobilise "the ethical consumer" as a newsworthy narrative figure" (2005a: 48). Alongside the No Sweat campaigning of the mid 1990s (see Ross 1997), the media-savvy strategies of organized consumer groups saw the growing mainstream coverage of ethical issues.

Perhaps what was most crucial here in terms of normalizing the figure of the ethical consumer was the mode of address adopted by the ethical consumption lobby. As Barnett et al. argue, while grounded in "wider programs of mobilization, activism, lobbying and campaigning" (2005a: 50), various organizations sought to impact on and reshape everyday consumer practices by addressing the consumer in the media as a privatized, informed individual. Connelly and Prothero likewise note that in the past two decades the 'green consumer' has become an increasingly popular concept (2008), with government initiatives over the past decade targeting consumers as informed, calculative agents through domestically based campaigns such as 'reduce, reuse and recycle', thereby privileging the home as a site of political-cultural change (Hobson 2006; Potter and Oster 2008).

The prominent figure of a savvy, reflective consumer-citizen within the media and in government policy has inevitably found the attention of marketers concerned with exploiting the cultural shift towards 'affirmative purchasing' (Carrignan et al. 2004: 413). As the following quote from the marketing journal Brand Strategy suggests, the ethical consumer has become an important demographic entity for marketers.

The 'Yuppies' defined lifestyle marketing in the 1980s. Emotional marketing came to the fore in the 1990s, typified by consumer 'cool hunters'. But the noughties will be judged by the 'New Premium Consumer' (NPC). This customer group has values that combine bohemian creativity, a rock 'n' roll attitude, diversity, ethical consumption and socio-political consciousness. Its members are early adopters, prepared to pay more for the individuality inspired by leading-edge cultures.

(Hujic 2005: 32)

The perceived importance of this emergent, affluent consumer demographic is reflected in the rise of publications like New Consumer magazine, which offers green lifestyle advice on everything from food to fashion complete with glossy images of celebrity greenies. Describing itself on its website as 'the UK's hottest ethical lifestyle magazine', New Consumer tells prospective advertisers that '[i]t is the leading title for people who have already been through the milkshake handouts. It is the perfect complement to your essential retail mix and our advertisers, who are businesses changing the world'. As these examples indicate, in the paradigm of ethical consumption as it is represented 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 is a direct result of this recognition that consumption is a prominent site of political concern and exercise among citizens.

Though grounded in a longer history of political activism around consumer issues, what has been crucial to the mainstreaming of ethical consumerism is its integration into lifestyle and consumer culture, and its articulation with the dominant modes of agency associated with late modernity — that is, to forms of agency tied to perceptions of risk (both personal and collective) (Beck 1992), to reflexive, choice-based modes of identity (Giddens 1991), and to the decentralizing of the state as the recognized site of civic responsibility. This shift has resulted in the emergence of new forms of citizenship and agency as, increasingly, "the inefficiency, the limits and the inevitable failings of state provision incite individuals, families, communities [and] employees [to] take back to themselves the powers and responsibilities that have been acquired by states" (Rose 1999: 2–3).

This loss of public trust or investment in the state, caught up with the state's own retreat from social service provision, is a crucial factor in the rise of ethical consumption. In contrast, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and organizations associated with 'good works' have gained in status and influence. While critics such as Lauren Berlant see such developments in negative terms as 'downsizing the subject to a mode of voluntarism' (1997: 5), our interest in this collection is, at the same time, to understand consumer citizenship as a field of action, experience and effect that is both constraining and productive in terms of enabling new forms of political governance and agency.

A further and key context for the uptake in ethical consumerism is the widespread biopoliticization of Western culture, which connects to a growing 'ethicalization of existence' under advanced liberalism (Rose 1989: 263–64). Here, questions of life style are invested with questions of life and death, both literal and metaphorical. Climate change, for instance, threatens the well-being of many millions of people around the world. Clive Hamilton describes the processes involved in altering current unsustainable consumption as 'experiencing a sort of death' for the subject: if "consumption activity is the primary means by which we create an identity and sustain a fragile sense of self", he writes, then when 'we are asked to change the way we consume . . . we are being asked to change who we are' (2007: 1). While consumption studies has long understood consumer practice as a mode of self-fashioning, the biopolitical tenor of contemporary existence means that human life itself, its constitution and its sustenance, is the underlying concern of the contemporary polis. Furthermore, and as we later discuss, actor-network theorists — influenced by the work of Bruno Latour and Michel Callon — have foregrounded the role of non-human agents (such as animals and the environment) in posing ethical questions and constituting ethical subjects, a strategy which de-privileges the human in the constitution of life (Maturra 2009) while challenging the shape of ontological politics.

Our use of the term 'ethical' rather than 'political' consumption in this collection, then, is tied both to its broader currency in contemporary culture today and also to its utility for marking this aforementioned shift in the nature of politics.
The notion of ethical consumption for us addresses a cultural turn in advanced liberal societies around the world whereby political questions have become increasingly linked to everyday, personal, ordinary domestic lives, that is to an ordinary politics (Barnett 2003b). The notion of the ‘ethical’ here, as we have indicated, is not necessarily tied to stable external moral frameworks, but rather speaks to what is at once a more pluralized and privatized moral universe. The ordinary and often individualized nature of the ethical—drawing from Foucauldian work on governmentality—indicates a changing relation between citizen and society in which ‘the government of conduct’ increasingly operates on ‘a territory marked out by the vectors of identity, choice, consumption and lifestyle’ (Rose 1996: 344).

A reflexive, risk-oriented perspective on ethical consumption similarly implicates ‘life politics’ in a growing sense of connection between personal life choices and community, national and global concerns. Here, the ethical entails a turning outward to ‘others’, whether distant producers of commodities or non-human others such as the environment, thus locating the act of private consumer choice within a space or network of relations. In utilizing the rhetoric of ‘choice’, however, our concern is not to overemphasize the calculative rational dimensions of consumer practices, or in turn to underplay the structural constraints on consumers as social actors. Rather, the notion of the ‘ordinarily ethical’ as we are using it here also aims to speak to the routinized and habitual nature of consumption, and to the ways in which ethical conduct is increasingly becoming tied to everyday practices, relations of being and ontological production.

**Mapping the scholarly field**

As we have noted, it is hard to draw a clear definitional line around the phenomenon of ethical consumption within contemporary culture. Equally, in emergent scholarship on the topic, it presents as a complex shifting object that requires a range of critical tools and approaches. In this next section we want to map briefly some of the work being done in the field, and to explore some of the disciplinary and scholarly frameworks that are emerging as particularly useful and relevant for thinking through consumer ethics today.

A number of monographs and edited collections touching on issues related to consumption, ethics and sustainability have been published within and across a range of disciplines. Key monographs in this burgeoning field include the work of two contributors to this collection, Jo Littler’s Radical Consumption: Shopping for Change in Contemporary Culture (2009) and Kim Humphrey’s Excess: Anti-consumerism in the West (2010) (which both draw upon cultural studies and cultural theoretical approaches), and that of Swedish political scientist, Michele Micheletti’s Political Virtue and Shopping: Individuals, Consumerism, and Collective Action (2005). A number of edited collections have also begun to address questions of ethical and alternative forms of consumption including Kate Soper et al.’s The Politics and Pleasures of Consuming Differently (2009), which discusses the ethics and politics of consumer choice within the broader frame of alternative conceptions of the good life and in particular ‘alternative hedonism’.

David A. Crocker and Toby Linden’s Ethics of Consumption (1998), which draws upon a range of disciplinary approaches from philosophy to economics; and Rob Hurton et al.’s collection The Ethical Consumer (2003), which brings together the perspectives of academic theorists with campaigners and business practitioners. In addition, Jo Littler and Sam Hindley’s guest edited issue of Cultural Studies (2008) on anti-consumerism tasks cultural studies to explore the ethical consumption phenomenon.

Aside from these more prominent interventions, work on ethical consumption is starting to emerge from a range of disciplines. The many fields engaged in scholarship around the question of consumer ethics—economics, marketing, political economy, business, geography, sociology and cultural studies—are often also concerned with a range of other parallel and overlapping questions and concerns including ‘green capitalism’, corporate social responsibility and the social life of objects. A crucial parallel literature is growing on sustainable consumption, including key texts such as The Earthscan Reader on Sustainable Consumption (2006), Cohen and Murphy’s edited collection Exploring Sustainable Consumption (2001) and Gill Seyfang’s The New Economics of Sustainable Consumption: Seeds of Change (2009), which, with their focus on policy concerns, political economy and the collective impact of consumer practices, offer an important corrective to excessively individualized lifestyle-oriented approaches. It is hard to do justice to all the scholarly approaches and debates around ethical consumption and related issues here, but it is possible both to summarize some of the main areas in the humanities and social sciences out of which work has emerged, and to point to the fields and approaches that we see as offering potential for grasping the complexity of the ethical turn in consumer culture.

**Consumption studies**

One of the more obvious fields where one would expect work to be undertaken on ethical consumption is in consumption studies although, ironically, scholars in this area have been somewhat slow to pick up this issue. What this field offers, however, is a range of explanatory frameworks for conceptualizing consumption as it is practiced more broadly, some of which have considerable utility for comprehending the current ethical moment. Without retracing the well-trodden path of debates around consumer agency, for instance, one important line of argument within consumer studies of relevance to ethical consumption has been the critique of rationalist models of consumer behaviour (the consumer as sovereign) on the one hand and psychologized Frankfurt school conceptions (the consumer as passive dupe) on the other. What has emerged out of such debates is a range of more nuanced and shifting notions of consumers and their relation to identity construction and everyday consumption practices.

Featherstone’s classic account in Consumer Culture and Postmodernity (1991) of the growing symbolic role of consumption and of a broader stylized lifestyle culture through which one experiences and performs identity, offers one
such hermeneutics for making sense of ethical consumption. Likewise, as we have indicated, more recent work on the centrality of branding to contemporary culture has extended this work on the symbolic dimensions of consumption to fruitful ways (Klein 2000; Lury and Arvidsson 2000). Arvidsson, for instance, contends that brands are playing an increasingly central role as a source of shared beliefs, meanings and social connectedness within contemporary capitalism. In today’s thoroughly branded world, consumption can be seen to have taken on an enabling and productive quality, as a site or set of practices through which consumers construct “the common social world that connects them to each other” (Arvidsson 2000: 19). Under this model, ethical consumers and their relation to ethical brands such as Fair Trade and Oxfam can be seen in many ways as archetypal consumers within a branded environment which relies on the intrinsic and emotional input and labour of consumers.

Another seminal text on consumption that offers potential for locating ‘alternative’ consumer practices is Colin Campbell’s The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism, first published in 1987. Here, the recent ethical turn can be linked back to a longer romantic strain in consumer culture. Revisiting debates about the origins of consumer capitalism, Campbell complicates Weberian arguments concerning the split between romantic ideals and modern materialism. Rather than seeing modern consumer capitalism as a site of disenchantment and alienation, Campbell argues that romanticism was and continues to be a central force within consumer culture. The romantic emphasis on developing one’s moral character through creative hedonism and aestheticism is carried through for Campbell into the contemporary consumer world with its emphasis on imaginative desires, beauty and endless novelty. Although Campbell’s focus is on the romantic undertones of consumer culture as a whole, such a frame is particularly useful for conceptualizing ethical and other alternative modes of lifestyle and commodity associated, as they often are, with romantic concerns around re-enchancing modernity, connecting with nature, and with creative identity-shaping forms of engagement with the commodity world. Other scholars have similarly sought to re-think consumption, Kate Soper (2008), in her more recent work, writes about ‘alternative hedonism’ and the ‘sensuous pleasures of consuming differently’ while Jane Bennett’s research foregrounds ‘commodity enchantment’ as a trigger for ethical practice (2001).

A range of anthropologists of consumption, from Douglas and Isherwood to Appadurai, have also worked to challenge conventional and narrowly economic models of consumerism and material culture. Anthropologists and consumption theorist Daniel Miller’s work in particular seeks to frame consumer practices as productive of social, rather than just calculative and marketized, relations. Like Soper and Bennett, Miller emphasizes the affective dimensions of consumption, and talks about shopping for others as a marker of ‘love and care’ (Miller 2001: 230), rather than viewing practices of ethical consumption as being completely subsumed within the economic logic of commodity capitalism.

While the symbolic and emotional aspects of consumption have been increasingly brought to the fore in consumption studies, another important and underdeveloped strand in the field is a focus on ordinary consumption. Drawing upon cultural studies and sociological work on everyday life, the turn to the ‘ordinary’ offers some useful models for thinking through the ways in which ethical consumer and lifestyle practices are often not about conscious choices or overtly symbolic modes of communication, but rather are tied to the rhythms and habits of everyday life (Greenow and Wardle 2001; Hawkins 2006). As we discuss below some of these concerns about the affective, non-symbolic and everyday nature of consumption are being further developed and explored in other areas, such as cultural geography and Latourian studies of material culture.

In thinking through the everyday modalities or, more specifically, the habitus of ordinary consumption, a final important line of thought within consumption studies – touched upon by several contributors in this collection – concerns questions of class and distinction. A recurrent theme within both popular and scholarly discussions of ethical consumption is its bourgeois connotations, with journalist George Monbiot warning in a 2007 article that “[e]thical shopping is in danger of becoming another snobbiest of social status”. Veblen’s theory of status emulation would seem to continue to hold some utility for conceptualizing the more conspicuous, performative dimensions of green and ethical consumer practices, such as the strategic placement of Fair Trade products in middle-class homes.

Bourdieu’s arguments about distinction, however, offer rather more nuance to the classed dimensions of ethical consumption. As Littler notes in this collection, claims made for the democratic nature of consumer-based politics (the notion that all consumers have free choice) continue to be undermined by the recognition of the class barriers to consuming the ‘right goods’ (such as access to organic produce), barriers that are not economic but related to the kind of class dispositions or cultural capital and forms of taste people bring to their consumption practices. Much of what gets defined as ‘good’ forms of consumption and lifestyle today, then, are not coincidentally tied to middle-class virtues. Such debates about class and consumption point to some of the structural inequalities and cultural values that frame the field of consumption complicating a one size fits all model of the consumer.

Geography

While consumption studies has been relatively slow to take up the challenge of alternative consumer practices, the discipline that has perhaps contributed most to the emerging scholarship on this topic has been geography, particularly cultural geography. The global cultural and political contexts to which alternative and political consumerist practices inevitably speak clearly point to the relevance of forms of analysis that emphasize questions of space and place. These analyses frame such questions in terms of a range of interconnected concerns around the politics of post- and neo-colonialism and global economies, as well as the ‘non-representational’ and ‘more-than-human’ politics associated with the work of the ‘new cultural geographers’ such as Nigel Thrift and Sarah Whatmore.
Geographers have brought a range of different critical lenses to questions of ethical consumption, but one of their primary contributions has been to map what has been called the ‘commodity chain’. This is to expose the connections between production processes and consumption practices and the various activities, relations and policies in between. As Hughes and Reimringer discuss in the introduction to their edited collection *Geographies of Commodity Chains* (2004), the rise of commodity chain analysis has gone hand in hand with increasing popular interest in the social lives of commodities. The recent emergence of a 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 *Sister Chocolate: The Dark Side of the World’s Most Seductive Sweet* speaks to a growing concern among political activists and consumers alike regarding the provenance and the politics of the goods they buy.

In the context of globalization and commodity production, the growing length of commodity chains and the increasing disconnection between consumers and producers, geographic approaches are becoming crucial to understanding the complex relations underpinning consumption today. As Hughes and Reimringer note, a range of approaches is mapping the commodity chain from emergence to purchase. The more conventional global commodity chain approach seeks (like the popular exposés of commodity production mentioned above) to reveal the hidden geographies embedded or masked within the social relations of contemporary consumption, reflecting a Marxist-inspired concern with commodity fetishism and with foregrounding processes of commodity production in peripheral regions of world economy for retail and consumption in the ‘centre’. The political economy of the global agri-food industry, particularly meat production, is often seen as exemplary of this disconnection between consumers and the exploitative realities of production. Loans from the World Bank to Central America, for instance, have seen traditional forms of farming and use of land increasingly tied to broader globalized and industrialized systems of meat production, which increasingly treat cattle as commoditized biological goods in feedlots and large ranches.

As Hughes and Reimringer note, however, global commodity chain approaches are not without their limitations. Questions of the role of the consumer and the retail dimension of the commodity chain are often treated as trivial matters - purely starting points for moving on to discuss more important exploitative relations of production. The focus of global food chain analysis, for example, is invariably trained on the industrialization of labour processes at the level of production rather than taking into account the broader role of retailers, restauranteurs, nutritionists, advertisers and other players in the global food industry. Such approaches tie into a fairly narrow understanding of consumer society as driven by Fordist logics of economic efficiency and standardization, with consumers configured as mindless and passive, uncomplainingly embracing a massified experience of food. A more complex commodity chain model, by contrast, endows consumers with significant influence to impact on sites of production, both close and distant, as in the case of pressures towards monocultivation of foods in Brazil and Thailand to supply the desires of fickle Western markets.

Another significant dimension of consumer influence relates to the growing visibility and impact of the political and ethical dimensions of consumption within and on commodity chain processes. Geographers have highlighted the ways in which consumers’ geographical knowledges can play a central role in progressive social change through notions such as ‘eating at a distance’. Such concerns with revealing the spatial politics behind commodities also often underpin the rationale and marketing strategies behind ethical brands and products such as Fair Trade, whose advertisements frequently feature images of first world consumers alongside farmers, weavers and textile makers from the global South. Similarly, strategies employed in relation to labelling products as locally produced also speak to the rising concern with food miles - that is, the amount of carbon dioxide emitted in the transportation of a product from source to consumer - and the generation of new auditing techniques and marketing devices that certify and label products as ‘ethical’ in this regard, such as Tesco’s placement of ‘air-mile’ stickers on fresh produce in the UK. The decontextualization of commodities here, then, is placed side by side with notions of consumer sovereignty and moral agency (Goodman 2004).

At the same time critical geographers like Ian Cook and Philip Cramb have also pointed to the limits of such consumer-centred approaches (1996). Criticising the idea that knowledge about commodities will somehow reveal their ‘essence’, they argue that ethical consumption is often involved in a process of double fetishisation in which consumer knowledge about commodities is at once restricted at the same time as marketers and retailers emphasize particular geographic knowledges as a way of adding distinction to products. Here undue weight is given to the ability of first world consumers to understand and impact on 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 (agency) northern consumers and (passive) southern producers.

Cultural geographers have also attempted to capture further the complexity of the relations between production and consumption and other dimensions of the commodity chain through non-linear models such as commodity circuits and, drawing upon Latourian or actor-network approaches, commodity networks such as the approaches are again sceptical of the objectivist notion that one can simply unveil the ‘real’ conditions of production. They are also particularly critical of the human-centred models of consumer sovereignty; instead their focus is on the role of a range of humans and non-human actors (actants) and practices in the construction of commodity relations. Much work in this field has accordingly sought to track the operations of non-human materials and objects (such as plastic bags) as social actors in themselves - possessing ‘agency’ not because of what humans do or do not do with them, but because of their specific material qualities and what these trigger or afford (Hawkins 2006; Foster 2008).

Lastly, and relatedly, the British geographer Clive Barnett and Nick Clarke, along with fellow researchers Paul Cloke and Alice Malpass (2005a and 2005b),
have sought to critique narrow conceptualizations of ethical decision-making by consumers in their research on ethical consumption in the UK. While they focus primarily on the role of consumers in terms of the ethics and politics of responsibility in contemporary neoliberalism, their work emerges out of a growing recognition in cultural geography that the ethical dimensions of consumption are enacted and produced through everyday practices, as well as being figured as ‘ethical’ through their wider framing as practices of ‘good citizenship’. This recognition has led to a shift in focus from the informed consumer as rational agent to a growing emphasis on the networks, organizations and the material contexts that shape people’s consumption practices.

**Political theory**

This understanding of everyday consumption practices as a space of politics and citizenship brings us to another scholarly field of interest that is central to understanding ethical consumption today: debates concerning civic culture and political citizenship. As we have already noted, one important context for the mainstreaming of political and ethical forms of consumerism is the emergence of diverse forms of citizenship under neoliberalism. These include consumer-oriented modes of citizenship (Miller 2007) and also ecological or sustainable forms of citizenship, whereby a recognition of planetary limits informs an ethos of responsibility to, and rights for, non-human others (Debón and Sáz 2001). Scholars such as Adrienne permitting have pointed to a fundamental transformation in the ethics of citizenship in this context, characterized by governance regimes ‘concerned less with the social management of the population ... than with individual self-governing’ (2006: 501). Accordingly, the ascendency of micro-politics, or ‘the relational acts of the self’ (Connolly 1999: 140), as a scholarly interest over recent years, provides an important frame for understanding the phenomenon of ethical consumption that moves beyond a blanket critique of neoliberal impacts.

Similarly, Michele Michail (2003) argues that – in 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, for Michail, 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).

Michail’s perspective 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 people’s everyday lives today are increasingly embedded in questions of civic values and concerns around social responsibility. As we have indicated earlier, these reconfigurations of political form and practice complicate oppositions between public issues, citizenship and private interests
a broader political frame, which reveals not just its affordances, but also its limitations and inequities. These limitations are linked to foundational questions around the ongoing sustainability of existing social and economic organizational structures in the global North. Can we live ‘the good life’ within a narrowly materialist culture? As Joel Bakan puts it, can capitalism have a conscience? (2004: 31). What the practices and politics of ethical consumption at its most radical can bring us to then is a rethinking of the ‘good life’ and of ethical living in ways that fundamentally challenge the logics of consumer culture itself.

Critical perspectives on ethical consumption

Given our emphasis on the broad and variegated nature of ethical consumption, this collection is less concerned with defining the field than with offering a variety of perspectives into the diversity of politics, practices, sites and actors that constitute this cultural turn. Reflecting the complex and evolving nature of the area, the essays in this collection offer a range of methods and modes of analysis.

As we have noted, as an object of study or enquiry ethical consumption has little respect for academic disciplinary boundaries and requires a multi-modal approach. Within the broad confines of the humanities and social sciences, this collection attempts to offer just such a multi-focal and interdisciplinary engagement with the topic at hand.

Part 2, ‘Politics’, offers a range of perspectives on the political concerns and contexts out of which the ethical turn in consumer culture has emerged. Jo Lutter provides an overview of the various and contradictory ways in which ethical consumption is viewed, as at once a field of radical potential and political limitation. For her, the political efficacy of ethical consumption is not a given but can only be assessed through the specifics of particular, localized practices.

Kim Humphrey places the phenomena of ethical consumption in the broader context of contemporary anti-consumer movements in the West, from ‘culture jamming’ to ‘slow living’. Humphrey thus explores how ethical consumption relates to, bolsters and contradicts these other forms of contesting consumerism.

Timothy J. Scrase’s essay examines the politics of global Fair Trade through a discussion of the marketing of Fair Trade goods on the web. Discussing the ‘competitive entrepreneurism’ normalized in Fair Trade markets, Scrase suggests that processes of commodification pose challenging questions to the ethical claims of Fair Trade products and their consumers. Michael Gaudt links the question of ethical consumption to contemporary concerns around the so-called ‘obesity epidemic’ in the global North, examining to what extent the rise of neoliberalism accounts for the emergence of this perceived ‘epidemic’. Documenting the complex ‘ideological contestations’ within obesity debates, Gaudt concludes that the ‘obesity epidemic’ is not the product of any single ideological enterprise nor is it fully explainable via any single theoretical framework.

The chapters in Part 3, ‘Commodities and Materiality’, focus on a range of goods in relation to broader questions around commodity chains and networks, the ‘placing’ of ethical products, in terms of both local and global contexts, and the broader political economies that frame consumer ‘choice’. Benjamin Coles and Philip Crang argue that the dynamics of place and place-making play a central role in ethical and alternative forms of consumption. Drawing upon fieldwork at London’s Borough Market, they examine the ways in which the performative and representational space of the market works to produce an experience of ‘alternative’ cultures and geographies of food consumption for consumers in which commodities are both de- and re-fetishized. Broadening the focus to a discussion of the global food industry, Elisabeth Probyn pushes the debate concerning the ethics of eating beyond the black and white terrain of moralized conduct. Critiquing the narrow ‘reification of choice’ which spotlights the responsibilities of the individual eater, Probyn instead locates questions of consumer ethics within the broader context of government policies, global agribusiness, and the rise of ‘un-natural foodstuff’ to foreground the limitations of choice-based models for understanding the complexities of eating. Ethically branded bottled water is the subject of Emily Potter’s chapter, in which she discusses a range of such brands as characteristic of the ethical turn in marketing this environmentally suspect product. On the one hand, ‘ethical water’ sits within paradigms of responsible consumption, where the consumer is invited to perform certain subjectivities through their engagement with ‘ethical’ bottled water. Yet it also indicates the ways in which the administration of life has been foregrounded in advanced liberal economies, as producers actively position themselves as biopolitical agents in their claims to ‘do good work’. Paul Starr turns his focus to the wine industry. Comparing the politics and debates over sustainability and social responsibility in Australia and the UK, he teases out distinctions between ethical consumption and sustainable consumption, while foregrounding the limits of rational choice models of consumer sovereignty.

Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller employ an internationally oriented political economy approach to consider questions of ethical consumption posed by the global electronics market. The complex geographies of electronic commodity production, and the ambiguous nature of electronic technology framed simultaneously as both solution to sustainability challenges, and as a significant contributor to pollution and waste, mean that determining the ‘eco-ethical’ nature of electronics is far from straightforward. The final two chapters in the section address the issue of ethical consumption and fashion. Adrian Franklin looks at the ethics of second-hand consumption given the contemporary popularity of vintage and retro goods, and changing associations with the purchase and use of second-hand products. Providing a complex historical account of this consumer market and practice, Franklin shows that the emergence of this market is a result of much more than just ‘ethical’ or sustainability concerns. Gibson and Staines similarly present a complex picture of ethical fashion as an alternative market in which is increasingly identified as an environmentally unsound industry. They note, like Franklin, that while sustainable fashion practices are on the rise the motivations behind these practices are difficult to ascribe to purely ethical purposes.
Part 4, ‘Practices, Sites and Representations’, focuses on how ethical consumption is conducted, promoted and portrayed in people’s lives, homes and neighbourhoods and through leisure activities such as tourism and watching television. In their chapter, Wendy Parkinson and Geoff Craig look at the question of ethical lifestyles exercising in particular, the concept of slow living. They argue that practices of sustainable living—manifested in changing modes not only of consumption but also of food production, transportation and energy generation—require a slowness that carries with it a more acute consciousness of ethical sensibility in relation to place and the rhythms of everyday life, including weather patterns and seasonality. Fiona Allon turns her attention to the rising popularity of green home renovations as an example of individualized politics under advanced liberal governance. However, as she argues, this does not necessarily represent a turn away from civic engagement. Drawing on interviews with eco-home owners, Allon illustrates the intersections of individual and public interest that arise in the practices of green home-making. In their chapter, Kersty Hobson and Ann Hill position the rise of organized gardening projects around the world in the context of government interventions into community health and well-being. In a close empirical study of two such projects, one from Australia and one from the Philippines, they seek to complicate a straightforward reading of organized gardening initiatives as disciplining modes of governmentality, and instead elucidate the ways in which participants resist and intervene in predetermined outcomes. Using Bourdieu’s theory of cultural intermediaries, Frances Bonner takes a look at lifestyle television as a site in which various modes of ethical consumption are explored and promoted. Gardening and food-related programmes in both the UK and Australia form the particular focus of her chapter, which views cultural intermediaries as productive of consumption patterns that move towards reduced and alternative forms of consumption. Cathy Greenfield and Peter Williams offer a historical account of the practice of ethical investment, tracking its origins to the emergence of finance as a ‘virtuous’ profession in the seventeenth century, and more recently with the conjunction between discourses of sustainability and finance literacy. The chapter considers the cultural formation of the ‘ethical investor’ through media presentation of injunctions to make profits through doing good. Finally, in their essay, Robert Melkkveer Figueroa and Gordon Watt analyse the phenomena of eco-tourism as a node of consumption that implicates a range of ethical concerns including environmental sustainability, postcolonial relations, heritage and development. Uluṟu in Australia provides a case study of what they call ‘the moral terrain’ of eco-tourism in which the multiple interests that cluster around the practice of tourism in such a site are negotiated. Appropriately their essay ends the collection with a focus on the shifting and ‘relational’ nature of ethics—in an approach which decentres the conscious human subject from ethical decision-making, framing ethical practices as processes produced through and in relation to broader social, cultural, political and economic networks.

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Note
1 As Harrison notes, by 2001 ‘sixty-six per cent of UK consumers in their thirties and forties claimed to have boycotted brands because of their unethical behaviour, and eighty per cent of all consumers thought that companies should attach at least as much importance to “social responsibility” as profits when making business decisions’ (2001: 13).

Bibliography


