Doing Politics in an Ethical Register

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I want to pick up on the theme of ‘care’.

The range of concerns that people are now expected to care about and take personal responsibility for through their everyday consumption activities extends to all sorts of ‘global’ problems, such as climate change, human rights, biodiversity loss and trade justice.

Our research looked at practices of ethical consumption in and around the city of Bristol.

Talking to people from a range of social areas and social backgrounds, what we found was that people certainly do not lack information about the consequences of their consumption activities; far from it – the know all about dodgy practices at McDonalds, about supply chains and supermarkets, about carbon footprints, about plastic bags and excessive packaging. Information is not the problem.

What they did express was frustration about being told that they were responsible for all sorts of things – from their own health and their pensions to the destruction of rainforests and child exploitation in far away places – without having being given practical means of acting on these ascribed responsibilities.

So what we looked at in our research were the diverse practices through which people seek to empower themselves to act on various global responsibilities, and the various devices and storylines that NGOs and campaign organisations and independent businesses and alternative media use in seeking to empower people in their turn.

The rise of ethical consumption is often presented as a middle class, privatized process that substitutes for, perhaps even undermines, more collective forms of solidarity and public action. It is often said that the only votes that count in this kind of activity are the purchasing decisions of relatively wealthy consumers. And it is often said that it is a way in which people salve their consciences without making any fundamental commitments.

Our research suggests a more complex interpretation:

Firstly, ethical consumption goes on everywhere. It goes on in middle class neighbourhoods served by trendy 'shabby chic' ethical high streets. And it goes on in relatively deprived social areas where the main retail outlets, perhaps the only one, is the Co-op.

Secondly, ethical consumption is really an extension of political concerns into the ordinary spaces of everyday life - into the home, schools, and workplaces. This is how ordinary people think and talk about buying organic food or choosing fair trade; it is also how campaign organisations think about the opportunities that consumer-oriented activism afford them for mobilising support.

In this light, I want to emphasise two of the findings from our project:

First, being an ‘ethical consumer’ is not really an individualistic pursuit at all. It is embedded in all sorts of social networks. It as members of church groups or trade unions or post-natal coffee groups that people learn about and put into practice various decisions about what, how and where to buy environmentally friendly, ethical sourced, organically grown, fairly traded goods and services. Moreover, these sorts of activities are often linked to broader forms of collective campaigning – the people who sell and buy fairtrade goods at the back of the church on Sundays are the same people who participate in Make Poverty History campaigns and who lobby their MPs about the Companies Act.

Secondly, there is more to ethical consumption than shopping. There is a great deal of campaigning going on which is aimed at transforming collective infrastructures of consumption. The campaign to make Bristol into a Fairtrade City is an example of this. This is a campaign aimed at changing whole systems of urban provisioning along more ‘ethical’ lines: in so far as it is successful in changing procurement policies in local authority canteens or in local businesses or in public buildings, they make everyone into an ethical consumer, whether they choose to be or not.

So, if ethical shopping is not necessarily individualistic, and if there is more to ethical consumption than shopping, then we might do well to recognise that what is going on here is rather more than consumers exercising their preferences in the market-place.

None of the people we talked to who thought of themselves as 'ethical consumers' were naïve enough to suppose that global systems of trade would be transformed just through consumer pressure – it was for them a way of raising awareness, of aligning their own commitments with the routines of everyday life, and of demonstrating to others that everyone could make a little difference.

Likewise, the organisations and businesses which provide innovative pathways for people to consume more responsibly do not think of themselves as turning 'unethical' consumers into ethical consumers, but rather as providing outlets for people's existing energies and commitments. And they see ethical consumption campaigning as just one route to mobilising support for broader efforts of lobbying and campaigning, or of building alternative systems of production, distribution and exchange.

In conclusion, then, rather than a narrowly individualistic affair, a retreat from real politics, or mere consumerism with a good conscience, ethical consumption might be best thought of as involving a range of *local practices* of *global solidarity*.