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Globalizing Ethical Consumption

1. Ethical Consumption and the Globalizing Middle Classes: An Emergent Field

Ethical consumption incorporates a wide range of movements, initiatives and practices through which values, morals, principles and ideals concerning social and environmental responsibility shape consumers' decisions about the purchase of goods and services, as well as their use and recycling (Carrier, 2012). Broadly conceived, it has been the subject of public interest and critical scrutiny over the past two decades. Academic interest has spanned different disciplines across the social sciences, yielding studies from political accounts of its neo-liberal dimensions (Micheletti, 2003) to ethnographic accounts of its cultural and historical embeddedness (Zukin and Maguire, 2004) and geographical perspectives on ethical relations in the global production network (Hughes et al., 2008; Reynolds, 2009). For its proponents ethical consumption choices are largely seen as a means to connect wealthy consumers with the all too often hidden worlds of poor producers and workers in an increasingly globalized economy.

The papers in this Special Issue point out that whatever position has been taken, the common assumptions of the great majority of work on ethical consumption are that producers are located in poorer countries, in particular those of the global South, and consumers are located in richer ones particularly in the global North. Not only political-economic perspectives of Global Value Chains (GVCs) and Global Production Networks (GPNs), but also cultural studies of consumption typically focus on ethical consumption in North America and Western Europe. Consequently, ethical consumption in the global South is under-researched and under-theorized, despite the fact that the burgeoning middle classes within emerging economies are playing an increasingly significant role in the global politics of consumption (Chua, 2000; Clammer 2003; Guarin and Knorrinda, 2014; Tsang, 2014;

Zhang, 2010) leading to questions both of consumption being used for self-definition and as a new vehicle for expressing social and environmental concerns (Davis 2005; Lange and Meier, 2010). The papers collected here address the over-arching questions of what the globalization of consumerism and rising middle classes mean for ethical consumption beyond advanced capitalist societies. Is ethical consumption increasing with the rise of a global middle class and, if so, is that changing what ethical consumption entails and where and how it is practised? What does ethical consumption look like in rising power and emerging economy contexts, and how does this challenge existing conceptualization? Moving beyond the case of ethically-labelled goods, some of the papers also broaden investigations to examine alternate moralities of consumption practices associated with ethics of care for proximate rather than distant others.

The papers probe both what ‘ethical consumption’ is and how the concept and category may travel and change as it appears in different cultural contexts. The concept has been applied to indicate three separate but related domains of ethical values. First, the policies of different institutions and corporate actors, that second come to constitute products marked as ethically produced and traded and, thirdly, the values and judgements of consumers in their purchasing decisions. All of these are problematic in and of themselves and tend to represent different sub-disciplinary interests in studies of consumers in relatively wealthy countries, but are open to arguably wider debate when the assumed institutions, markets and consumers change locations. In China, for example, organic food may be associated by consumers with *qi* (life force in traditional medicine) but it is concerns about food adulteration which are driving demand. Therefore designations of organic origin are rarely used, and mostly confined to Eastern city markets, but designations as ‘green’ (*luse shipin* with fewer chemicals) and ‘no public harm’ (*wu gonghai* with chemicals removed) are common (Klein, 2009). Our concern is not only to deconstruct the categories, but to see what work they do, and how they shape and frame issues – especially when they travel beyond their ‘original’ locations. For instance, the categorization of institutional behaviours enacted into codes as ethical trade is a limited version of ethical consumption, but our concern is rather with how that categorization and understanding (indeed self-understanding

among institutional actors) has effects and frames issues. In this sense we take the category of ethical consumption to be performative rather than descriptive. It clearly makes ethical claims and performs work – most notably to mark out specific acts, products and actors as possessing ‘good’ ethical values.

Recognizing the growth of new consumer markets challenges the anchoring assumptions in many widely used framings of ethical consumption. Much research has focused on inequalities along a globalized value chain (Berlan, 2012; Dolan, 2005; Mansvelt, 2005). However, when goods flow within and between countries in the South, different relationships between consumers, corporations and producers are created. Ethical concern in Euro-American markets has often focused upon distant others who are greatly disadvantaged compared to the consumers (Cravey, 2004; Clarke et al, 2007; Moor and Littler, 2004; Silvey, 2004). What happens when the consumers may be neither so distant, nor so affluent? Some markets for ethical products are emerging within the countries and regions that produce them (Hughes, 2015). Others are just as distant. Whilst there are affluent consumers all around the globe, much of the emerging demand is from those beginning to experience small discretionary surpluses in the context of hierarchies of status around branded and global products – often then very much a lower middle class. As Kochhar (2015: 6) suggests, “Even those newly minted as middle class enjoy a standard of living that is modest by Western norms.” The ethics of consumption there may well include the provision of choice for kith and kin, or creating social goods for exchange and circulation.

The growth of global consumer classes itself throws up a dilemma for different kinds of ethical critiques of consumption founded on the notion of ‘over-consumption’ that focus on promoting ecological sustainability (Isenhour, 2012). Here ethical consumption means consuming less and reducing resource use by focusing on increasing the life of products, either through designed durability, or maintenance and/or reuse. Often in the West these are touted as virtues of thrift and frugality, sometimes as rediscovering the virtues of less affluent times. And yet these are virtues of necessity,

from which many around the world may seek to escape. In other words, there are complex ethical issues regarding the links between increasing consumption and increasing resource use.

The papers in this Special Issue cohere around two key themes for understanding ethical consumption associated with the global South and emerging economies. The first concerns the influence of emerging ethical markets often, though not always, involving prominent ethical initiatives travelling from or via the global North and translated in Southern contexts. And the second prioritizes everyday consumption practices that can have ethical outcomes without necessarily being connected to any kind of strategic, market-based initiative.

2. Markets, Institutions and the Mobilization of Ethical Consumption in the Global South

Any analysis of firms and policy makers may see not so much or not only a response to consumer pressure for 'ethical behaviour' and products, so much as the creation of markets into which such products are sold. As markets are created in countries outside the global North the often 'universal' claims of ethical standards stand more starkly positioned as imbued with the values of advanced capitalist countries. Five of the papers in this Special Issue focus on the role played by institutions, including corporations, civil society organizations and the state, in framing and mobilizing ethical consumption in global South settings. The papers demonstrate the ways in which ethical markets in the global South are actively constructed through often transnational networks of corporate, civil society and state actors. Market-based ethical initiatives shaped in the global North are shown in some cases as travelling to the South. However, what the papers also show in a wide range of ways is the significance of Southern and non-Western institutions, values and traditions in shaping ethical consumption in emerging economies.

Doherty, Smith and Parker (this issue) address the creation of Fair Trade markets in Kenya, South Africa, Brazil and Nepal, demonstrating the active roles played by particular institutions in translating the Fair Trade model into ethical markets in these countries. Across these settings, the authors capture

the strategic attempts on the part of firms and Fair Trade organizations to broaden market reach beyond globalized expatriate communities to the growing domestic middle classes. In all four case studies, the authors emphasize how Fair Trade models travel in particular ways through networks of private and public institutions and the role of specific marketing strategies and practices in shaping Fair Trade for particular markets. To capture the cultural specificity of marketing strategies, they evaluate their “cognitive frames” through Pike’s (2009) notion of geographical entanglement. This permits an analysis of Southern Fair Trade market creation that not only appreciates the variety of institutional constellations at work in different places (e.g. the stronger influence of the state in Brazil compared with the key role of retailers in Nepal), but also the particular kinds of imagined geographies and local values selling Fair Trade in those places. These values and imagined geographies, often associated with local and national pride, solidarity and community-building, can contrast starkly with the often paternalistic expressions of care for distant others suggested by Dolan (2005) to be emblematic of Northern Fair Trade market creation. The paper by Kleine et al (this issue) explores the role of the state in depth in the case of ethical public procurement as a means through which ethical consumption is effectively “scaled up” in Brazil, as well as in Chile. In particular, these authors discuss how a Brazilian school meals procurement policy materially benefits and mobilizes public support for local and organic farming.

Like Doherty et al, Hughes, McEwan and Bek (this issue) seek to understand the creation of particular markets explicitly engendering ethical consumption, this time focusing on high-profile ethical labelling initiatives in South Africa. They put Barnett et al’s (2011: 90) focus on institutions “mobilizing the ethical consumer” into dialogue with perspectives on ethical consumption that emphasize embeddedness in local histories and values. Moreover, they illustrate how these ethically-labelled products are not only targeted towards the growing South African middle classes, but also how the middle class is itself a discursively constructed category that actively shapes, and is shaped by, marketing strategies. The paper highlights how local and national post-apartheid histories and trajectories shape the “practical and narrative resources” (Clarke et al, 2007: 235) used to sell ethical

products. Thus, while globalizing networks of institutions and business responsibility are also shown to influence ethical markets and consumption in South Africa, the paper argues that these markets are relationally constructed through localized idioms.

A relational perspective on ethicality is also advanced by Hawkins (this issue) on cause-related marketing practised in India and the USA. What Hawkins demonstrates is that cause-related marketing, involving corporate donations to ‘good causes’ related to the sale of a particular product, fits the legislative definition of corporate ethics in emerging economies such as India. Hawkins theorizes cause-related marketing as a mobile initiative to be traced through its journeys, in terms of both local specificity and global interconnectedness.

Two papers then challenge the assumed flows of people and things in ethical trade. In a contrast to seeing ethical consumption as involving the purchase and use of material goods brought to the consumer, Crang (this issue) traces the movement of people to consume Polanyian ‘fictitious commodities’ in ecotourism in China. Challenging ethical tourism research that concentrates on western tourists consuming spaces of the global South, this paper focuses on rising domestic tourism within China, and in particular ethnic and nature-based tourism. Tourism markets are shown to be created in part through the mobilization of particular kinds of locally-specific environmental ethics that serve to create economic opportunities for poor minority groups while also commodifying them as “bio-cultural resources”. Norris (this issue) challenges the directionality of ethical commodity flows. Norris looks at commodities donated from the global North to the global South (where many were originally made) and the ethical associations of these transitions. This aligns with a broader body of work on waste and recycling which has used the commodity biographies and trade governance of end-of-life goods to challenge prevailing perspectives of ‘follow the thing’ research and GPNs/GVCs respectively (Gregson et al, 2010; Crang et al., 2013). Norris points to the contemporary dissociation between ethical knowledge on the part of Northern donors of used textiles and the knowledges of

these commodities created by second-hand clothing importers, dealers and consumers bound up in Indian informal economies, where second-hand clothing is not marketed as an ethical choice.

3. Embedded Practices and the Ethics of Everyday Consumption

Existing theorization of ethical consumption highlights consumerism as a mode of governmentality in a marketized society (Barnett et al., 2011). From the consumption of Fairtrade and organics to trade justice campaigns and product boycotts, consumerism is seen as a dominant form of governance which dictates that politics and citizenship are practised increasingly through consumer choice. In the global North, the logic of the citizen as consumer and consumer as citizen has framed the development of mediating organizations seeking either to certify and supply products or to influence consumer choice (Barnett et al., 2011; Clarke et al., 2007; Micheletti, 2003). Much then has focused on the values of consumers and their connection (or not) with purchasing choices. The paper by Deng in this Special Issue explores the “ethical purchasing gap” between the ethical intentions and behaviours of consumers in China. However, work also extends this sense of ethical action into the realms of use and competing choices – into the ordinary ethics of showing care for kith and kin as well as distant others. Some academic research concerned with ethical consumption in the global North has opened out this angle (see, for example, Hall, 2011; Miller, 2001), but it also matters, perhaps in different ways, when drilling down on the scale of a global middle class in rising power and emerging economies. The papers here raise issues not just of whether ethics matter or to whom ethics matter for different products in different places, but which ethics and whose ethics are used to frame consumption choices.

Papers by McEwan et al. (this issue), Subrahmanyam et al. (this issue), Smith et al. (this issue), and Gregson and Ferdous (this issue) seek to extend the debate on non-Western ethical consumption into spaces they argue are often hidden by Northern-centric accounts, particularly those prioritizing ethical markets and labelling initiatives. They do so by decentring powerful institutions, markets and high-profile ethical initiatives associated with export-orientated production networks and instead embrace the realms of everyday life and ordinary consumption associated with the domestic middle classes of

the global South and East Central Europe. In this spirit, McEwan et al (this issue) draw on focus group research with Western Cape consumers to reflect on the importance of thrift for a diverse group of South Africa's middle classes. Thrift for these consumers is shown to connect not only to constraining consumption choices, but also to care for proximate others such as friends and family. Subrahmanyam, Stinerock and Banbury (this issue) pursue a rather different methodology to explore at an individual level what influences the ethical choices characterizing the everyday consumption of food, water, energy, transportation and housing. They take an approach influenced by auto-ethnography and interactive-researcher introspection to show how their own ethical consumption choices have been shaped by the countries in which they have lived (between them, the USA, Australia, India, Portugal and Singapore) and accompanying "communities of reference" associated with those places. In common with the other three papers on this theme of ordinary ethics, these authors emphasize how choices they have made regarding issues like the conservation of energy, recycling and the avoidance of certain products pre-date and go beyond schemes like Fairtrade, organics and anti-genetically modified foods, which tend to be the focus of Northern-centric narratives.

Smith et al. (this issue) take the theme of ordinary consumption and proximate familial and social relationships into the spaces of East Central Europe, in particular the Czech Republic and Poland, where a "significant minority" of middle class households engage in everyday practices of food self-provisioning. In the context of these post-Socialist economies witnessing rising numbers of more affluent middle classes, the persistence of locally-embedded traditions of self-provisioning seem unexpected and 'out of place'. Distinct from more high-profile, marketized and western forms of ethical consumption, they receive little political and public attention, and yet the authors highlight their social and environmental significance in terms of the contribution they make to sustainable consumption. The spotlight here is therefore upon the importance of what these authors term "quiet sustainability" in emerging economies.

Gregson and Ferdous (this issue) critique the privileging of the Northern consumer as the subject of responsibility in conventional accounts and conspicuous initiatives. They argue that the privileging of the Northern consumer not only holds sway in academic scholarship on ethical consumption, but also resonates in Bangladesh where responsibility for factory conditions and labour standards is seen to lie with various state institutions, corporations and consumers in the global North, absolving the country's domestic middle class consumers of responsibility. However, Gregson and Ferdous caution against a straightforward reading of this as an absence of ethical consumption in Bangladesh. Rather, they suggest that research needs to acknowledge the various ways in which ethicality is woven through production-consumption relations constituted *within* the domestic economy rather than simply looking for ethicality performed through more publicized export-orientated production networks. The case of the Bangladeshi brand, Aarang, owned by the NGO BRAC and retailing locally-produced goods to domestic middle class consumers, is discussed to illuminate how consumption in emerging economies can have “ethical effects” without necessarily being labelled explicitly as ‘ethical’. This argument complements other papers in the Special Issue arguing that ethical consumption in the global South needs to be understood in localized terms.

Conclusions

The 11 papers in this Special Issue arise from the Inaugural Geoforum-sponsored International Workshop held in Durham in the UK during July 2014. Taken together the papers acknowledge a range of ways in which ethical consumption, as a diverse set of movements and practices, is globalizing beyond the North. Through empirically-rich case studies of ethical markets and ordinary consumption in geographical contexts across Africa, Asia and Latin America, as well as Europe, North America and Australasia, the authors challenge prevailing political-economic and cultural understandings of ethical consumption. They do so by interrogating in different ways the relational geographies of ethical market creation and/or theorizing ethical consumption from the global South. The papers show how institutions' invocation of a rising global middle class and the discursive framing of a market are clearly repeated moves framing many transnational developments. In response, the papers give rise to further

questions about what a Southern theory of ethical consumption might look like. Does current scholarship risk relegating the ethics of the global South to being a local difference or entanglements on some universal values and an invariant economic structure? Might championing different ethical perspectives risk actors exempting themselves from uncomfortable questions regarding the consequences of rising consumption? How do we, as Northern academics, locate ethics then in different cultural traditions and consumption in different moral economies, whilst at the same time recognising the globalization of flows of goods, symbolic repertoires and institutional actors, of which our own practice is a constitutive part? The papers begin an important task of thinking through the work of translation, both academic and institutional, being conducted along with the transcultural subject positions being fostered by the growth of this and other forms of consumption. These subject positions and translations seem imbricated in the definition, and sometimes self-definition, of a globalising middle class on whose existence they are premised and of whose existence they are taken as evidence. An understanding of the reflexive positioning of this class formation both by its members and transnational and transcultural processes is a key agenda that bridges the often separate literatures of political economies of circulation and exchange and cultural analysis of desire, consumption and use.

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