

INTRODUCTION

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Ethical consumption has attracted increasing attention in Europe and North America over the past few years. As it has become more popular, the label has been applied to more and more different things, which makes it important to identify what it means. The words themselves are an obvious place to start. They indicate that it means taking into account the moral nature of objects when deciding whether or not to consume them. That moral nature could, in principle, spring from almost anywhere; in contemporary ethical consumption commonly it springs from the objects' social, economic, environmental and political context. Ethical consumers, then, are those whose decisions about what to consume (the 'consumption' part) are shaped by their assessment of the moral nature of that context (the 'ethical' part).

This encompasses a range of activities. Those who go to an ecotourism resort for a holiday rather than a conventional one, who bring their purchases home in their own bags rather than those provided by the shop, who refuse to buy cosmetics that have been tested on animals, who prefer the products of a company with a programme of corporate social responsibility, who take a train rather than a plane, all are basing their decisions on their assessment of the context of the objects on offer. Those who refused South African wine under the old apartheid regime, like those who refused Nestlé's products around 1980, rejected objects because they found aspects of their context to be wrong. The same is true of those who refused sugar produced with slave labour in the 1820s, as it is of Whites in the American South in the 1940s who refused to drink from a glass that a Black had used, and of those in 1930s Germany who refused to buy things sold by Jews.

My examples started with the uncontentious and ended with things that few people would recognise as ethical consumption. This breadth suggests that, if we want to make sense of ethical consumption, we need to go beyond the words. This Introduction will lay the analytical ground for the chapters that follow by going beyond those words, by locating ethical consumption in various of its social contexts to see what insights they generate. This, of course,

requires approaching ethical consumption as a social phenomenon. The easiest way to do this is to start with its most obvious form.

Identifying Ethical Consumption

The sort of ethical consumption that attracts the greatest public attention is the growing preference for objects that are produced in ways that are seen to be socially and environmentally good; or, at least, better than the alternatives on offer. The most obvious examples of this are objects that satisfy the requirements of one or another certifying organisation, such as the Forest Stewardship Council, the Soil Association or the Fairtrade Foundation. Of these, perhaps the most visible and most talked about is Fairtrade.

Certification by the Fairtrade Foundation is available only for objects produced and transacted in ways that meet particular standards. Coffee, for instance, can be sold as Fairtrade only if the merchant behaves in particular ways in relation to the producers and only if the producers are people who are organised and act in specific sorts of ways (Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International 2006). Although certification requirements vary for different items, broadly they enjoy a degree of social and economic cooperation and equality, and a loose, general concern to protect the natural environment. The most important Fairtrade products are foodstuffs produced in tropical regions: coffee, tea, cocoa and bananas. These come from places far from those who buy them, which gives some ethical consumption an air of 'nimbyism': a morality sensitive to what goes on elsewhere, but 'not in my back yard'.

The rising demand for these products indicates the growing popularity of ethical consumption. In Britain, for instance, sales of Fairtrade products increased by 49 per cent from 2005 to 2006, and rose about 80 per cent in the following year, to £493 million (Hickman and Attwood 2008); the 2009 sales were £800 million (Treanor 2010). Sales increased markedly thereafter, as Cadbury's decided to make their very popular Dairy Milk chocolate bar with Fairtrade cocoa starting in the summer of 2009, which was expected to increase UK sales of Fairtrade cocoa by about £180 million a year (Bowers 2009), and the large UK sugar company Tate & Lyle decided to shift all their commercial and industrial sugar to Fairtrade (Wearden 2008).

The moral values that concern ethical consumers vary widely. The decision to start consuming ethically can be taken with reference only to oneself or it can reflect a desire to become part of a social movement. It can be intended to bring about a better household or a better world. The goal can be to reduce global warming, secure a better life for farmers in Central America or protect fish stocks in the North Atlantic. But while their values and goals are diverse, ethical consumers have an activity in common, which they use to achieve their disparate ends. That activity is the first of the contexts in which I place ethical consumption, the practice of deciding what to buy and what to avoid: shopping.

Viewed by an individual in a supermarket, shopping may be the way to secure the objects one needs or wants for one's life. When viewed from a distance, however, it is the point where the economic, commercial world of production and retail trade meets the social world of household, family and friends. The relationship between these two realms of life, which I call economy and society, is a context that is important for understanding ethical consumption. It is so because it places ethical consumption in terms of broader social values and practices, making it easier to consider it not as a unique contemporary phenomenon but as, perhaps, one instance of a set of related social movements and practices.

The economy and society at issue, though, are not what would be revealed to a dispassionate observer, for this is not likely to be what motivates ethical consumers, or most other people. Rather, that motivation will come from what people think these realms are like and what they think the relationship between them is and ought to be. Ethical consumption, then, is a collective commentary on these realms and their relationship. As such, it is inherently, if not always overtly, political. Being concerned with economy, society and their relationship, it is about collective ideas, values, processes and institutions; being concerned to affect aspects of these realms and their relationship, it is necessarily a critique and an effort to bring about change. This political dimension does not preclude more private motives for ethical consumption. People can, for instance, decide to buy organic food because they think it will benefit their health. However, if personal desire is the only reason to do so, it lacks the collective or public dimension that makes ethical consumption not an idiosyncrasy, but a social practice.

Economy and Society

If we are to place ethical consumption in this context, it is necessary to consider the ways that people understand the realms of economy and society. With that foundation laid, we can see how ethical consumption relates to those two realms. In Europe and North America people of course see economy and society in many different ways. However, some understandings are fairly widespread and seem useful for thinking about ethical consumption.

For instance, a number of scholars, especially in the United States, have identified a basic cultural distinction between areas of life that look very much like economy and society. That distinction is not, moreover, something that resides only in people's minds. Rather, as Constance Perin (1977) shows, it is realised in the separation of residential areas from commercial and industrial ones, and so is manifest in land use and urban layout. Equally, Chaya Piotrkowski (1979: 87–98) shows that many people organise their day in ways that maintain, and even exaggerate, the difference between the social and economic sides of their lives. They change their identities at the end of the

working day, shrug off their jobs and refuse to let them impinge on their domestic lives.

More generally, David Schneider says that this distinction underlies central elements of people's understanding of kinship in the US, by which he means the ways that people understand themselves and their relationships with others. Furthermore, he argues that people do not see the two realms only as distinct. In important ways, they also see them as opposed:

The family as a symbol is a pattern for how kinship relations should be conducted; the opposition between 'home' and 'work' defines these meanings quite clearly and states them in terms of the features which are distinctive to each and opposed to the other. (Schneider 1980 [1968]: 45)

Echoing Schneider, Steve Barnett and Martin Silverman (1979: 51) argue that people see these realms as engaging different aspects of their beings. In the economic realm, the world of work, an insubstantial aspect of one's being is engaged, for that is the realm of 'individuals (more or less) freely entering into agreements to do certain things in accordance with certain standards and rules.' Earlier, Talcott Parsons (1959: 261) anticipated these points, and echoed the still earlier view of Weber (1978 [c. 1914]: 956–69), when he said that, at work:

roles are organized about standards of competence or effectiveness in performing a definite function. That means that criteria of effective performance ... must be predominantly universalistic and must be attached to impersonally and objectively defined abilities and competence through training.

The result is that the self that is engaged in the economic realm is not what people take to be their real self: 'at work, it is what one does and how he does it that counts. Who he is is not supposed to really matter' (Schneider 1980 [1968]: 47).

On the other hand, in the social realm people see their selves and relationships in terms of 'things which people believe to be real things, which are in an important sense thought to be internal to the individual or continuous with the individual as a concrete being' (Barnett and Silverman 1979: 51). Here, it is your being and your personal relationships with others that are important, not how well you perform your assigned tasks. As Schneider (1980 [1968]: 47) puts it:

even if a spouse rates low on every measure of competence or productivity which can be applied, from the output of clean shirts per week to the number of fond endearments issued per month, this in itself is not proper or sufficient grounds for terminating a marriage.

Although concern with people's core being in the social realm is clearest in the family, it is important as well in friendship. This is illustrated in Helen Gouldner and Mary Symons Strong's description of middle-class American

women. For instance, they report the way that one woman distinguished between her neighbours, with whom she was linked only by the accident of residence and the routines of keeping house, and her friends.

Even though you meet the same mothers and children over and over again and spend hours on end talking, you don't necessarily meet with people you want to become friends with. ... The relationship between the mothers is not based on who you are, but on how close you live to each other and whether the kids get along. It's a matter of convenience more than being attracted to someone and choosing them as friends. (Gouldner and Strong 1987: 65; see generally Carrier 1999)

It is worth repeating that these two realms are not simply distinct. Rather, they oppose each other, as do the elements that motivate people in the two realms and that symbolise each: love and money. Schneider (1980 [1968]: 46) points to the depth of this opposition when he says:

Home is not kept for money and, of those things related to home and family, it is said that there are some things that money can't buy! The formula in regard to work is exactly reversed at home: What is done is done for love, not for money! And it is love, of course, that money can't buy.

And again, Talcott Parsons (1959: 262) said pretty much the same thing earlier: 'Broadly speaking, there is no sector of our society where the dominant patterns stand in sharper contrast to those of the occupational world than in the family.'

I have said that the economy and society described here, an important part of the context of ethical consumption, are cultural entities. That is, they are not objective summaries of different aspects of people's daily round, but instead are symbols of different types of existence. And those are idealised types. Doubtless people experience friendship and self-sacrifice at work and rational calculation and self-seeking at home. That is not, however, the point. Rather, what these writers describe is a collective cultural summary of different kinds of values and different aspects of people, their lives and relationships. Further, because these realms are opposed to each other, the understanding of each feeds off that of the other, for they define each other negatively, as people fasten on, even celebrate, the differences between them. Maybe not one's own home and family, but certainly home and family in general is a realm of durable, affective relationships characterised by generosity and mutual concern. Perhaps not one's own workplace or local shops, but certainly economic life in general is a realm of transient impersonality full of people concerned only with profit and loss, who know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

Although distinct, these two realms are not independent of each other, with no way for the operations of one to affect people in the other or with no way for the motivations of one to be expressed in the other. In fact, ethical consumption is just such an expression, for it involves assessing the context of objects offered for sale in the economic realm in terms of values like personality, mutuality and equity, which are part of the social realm. In using these

assessments to shape their market transactions, ethical consumers inject social values into the economic realm. In this they are using the economy as a signalling system. This is a familiar part of economic thought (e.g., Spence 1976), which holds that when people buy one thing rather than another, their purchase signals their preference, a signal that passes up the chain from shop to wholesaler to manufacturer. Companies that want to stay in business will attend to those signals and adjust their operations accordingly. Thus, although the label directs our attention to the social world of consumption, ethical consumption relies on the market and the economic realm to achieve its goals.

In the preceding paragraphs I have considered ethical consumption in terms of the cultural distinction between economy and society. Approaching ethical consumption in terms of that context indicates that, whatever its particularities, it is one instance of a more general set of processes and concerns. That is because the distinction between economy and society appears to be important in places and times outside of the modern West, and hence outside of the home of present-day ethical consumption. This is indicated by a set of papers edited by Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch, *Money and the morality of exchange* (1989). Drawing on what their contributors have to say, Parry and Bloch argue that this distinction is widespread, perhaps a feature of all societies.

Parry and Bloch make their argument when they assert the common existence of two spheres of circulation, which resemble the realms that Stephen Gudeman calls 'community' and 'market' (described at length in Gudeman 2001, 2008). One of these realms entails transactions that are understood in terms of long-term goals and relationships, for they are intended to solidify and reproduce durable, collective institutions and values. Examples of this are the way that Christmas presents solidify and reproduce the family, brideprice payments do the same for kin groups and their relationships, ecclesiastical endowments do so for religious practices and foundations. The other sphere entails transactions that are understood in terms of short-term goals and relationships, for they are intended to satisfy immediate and individual desires. Examples of this are the way that trade at a village market allows a person to get food for a week, buying and selling furniture allows someone to pay the rent, hiring a labourer for half a day clears up the back garden.

As is the case with the realms of economy and society, these two spheres are associated with different norms and values (this is explored in Wilk 1996: 147–53). In the long-term sphere, people are expected to be generous and motivated by a collective good. In the short-term sphere, they are expected to be more self-serving and even competitive. Given the differences between these two spheres, commonly the boundary between them is important and crossing it is problematic and must be done carefully. For instance, converting wealth gained in the short-term realm into forms appropriate to the long-term is virtuous, but has to be guided by the proper morality, rather than be simply a way to seek fame. Likewise, as Paul Bohanan (1955) argues for the Tiv, crossing the boundary in the other direction should be a last resort, when times are so

tough that the only alternative is the dissolution of the social unit. Otherwise it is immoral, because it betrays the group and its values. That was the criticism Harold Macmillan, then Lord Stockton, made of Margaret Thatcher, in 1985. When her government disposed of Britain's national industries, she was, he complained, 'selling off the family silver'.

Emerging Economy

I have presented ethical consumption as an instance of a concern that appears in many societies with the relationship between economy and society. This does not mean, however, that people in different societies all see these realms as having the same content and significance. Rather, they are likely to have different expectations, motivations and experiences in economic and social activities. Moreover, these will be shaped by, as well as shape, economic life, the ways that people carry out the production and circulation of things.

Further, these ways are not timeless features of a society. Rather, they are likely to change over time. In most Western societies, people's economic lives have changed markedly during the past three centuries. Attending to these changes and their consequences helps us to understand the distinction between economy and society, and so helps us to see how the concerns expressed in ethical consumption have been expressed in other ways in the past. Increasingly over those centuries, people's experiences of economic life have been of wage labour and retail trade (see Carrier 1995: Chaps 2–4). Increasingly also, those experiences have diverged from what people expect in the social realm. This is only another way of putting an observation that Parry (1986: 467) has made. Over that period, he said, 'the economy becomes increasingly disembedded from society, ... economic relations become increasingly differentiated from other types of social relationship'. The most famous advocate of this separation, Adam Smith (1976 [1776]: 18), put it more starkly: 'It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest'.

This emergence and expansion of a distinct economic realm has not been an easy process. Rather, it generated tension and conflict because it reordered people's lives and threatened their values, at times radically and painfully. This is to be expected, for the emergence and development of the modern, Western realm of economy that concerns ethical consumers is the emergence and development of capitalism.

Recall that Marx, the most famous student of that emergence, argued (e.g., Marx and Engels 1948 [1848]: Part I) that the economy became a distinct realm of life in a way that, hitherto, it had not been. The European feudal societies that preceded capitalism all, of course, had an economic realm in the objective sense: people engaged in economic activity by producing and circulating objects and services. However, it was an economic realm only in

that objective sense, because economic activity was ordered by and understood in terms of things other than sheer economic calculation. Religion, kinship, locality, politics and personal fealty bound economic actors to their activities and to each other in ways that do not resemble the economic realm as it is seen to operate today.

However, with the emergence of capitalism the rising bourgeoisie threw off these constraints. Increasingly they came to operate, and think, in terms of monetary profit alone. They had to. While Weber's (1958 [1904–5]) ascetic Protestants may have sought profit for religious reasons, as a sign of their election, with the passage of time the sheer existence of firms rationally pursuing profit put pressure on all firms to do the same, or go under. The economy stepped forth as a separate realm governed by a distinctive logic that, said Weber (1981 [1923]: Chap. 22), enjoined the systematic and rational pursuit of profit in the context of the private ownership of raw materials, equipment and labour; by means of a market that ignores social identities and relations; with the reduction of all aspects of economy to monetary cost; and with an impersonal and predictable system of law. Marx and Engels (1948 [1848]: 11) said the same thing differently. The emergence of capitalism:

has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors,' and has left no other bond between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment.' It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation.

The development and expansion of such an economic system led to reaction, as people sought to protect the values and relationships that they saw being threatened, such as E.P. Thompson (1968) described in *The making of the English working class*. While their notion of what was being threatened may have been shaped by the emerging economic system (see Kahn 1990), the values and relationships at issue were part of the social realm and the threat was real. So, for instance, early in the nineteenth century English textile workers protested, often violently, against the introduction of machines that imposed an alien logic that made their economic activities more distant from pre-existing social values. 'Machinery was at issue because it was used in ways which specifically interfered with these values' (Calhoun 1982: 65). The English Luddites were not alone, for much of Europe experienced the Revolutions of 1848.

Another famous student of the emergence of capitalism is Karl Polanyi, though the historical period that he describes in *The great transformation* (1957 [1944]) and the issues that concern him are different from those that concerned Marx. The period ranges from late in the eighteenth century to the middle of the twentieth; the issue is the spread of the market. The pertinent aspect of this spread was the growing self-regulation of markets, their increasing freedom from government or other collective constraint, so that economic logic could

operate unhindered by the values of the social realm. Polanyi argued that this led to massive social and political disruption, culminating in what Winston Churchill (1948) called the 'second thirty years war', the two great wars in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. Reaction set in and constraints were imposed: Keynesian economic policies protected individuals and households from the market; the Bretton Woods system protected currencies and the countries that issued them from the market.

Polanyi (1957 [1944]: 130) describes that expansion, disruption and reaction as 'a double movement: the market expanded continuously but this movement was met by a countermovement checking the expansion in definite directions'. In this the market, the economic realm, first is disembedded from society. That is to say, increasingly it operated independently of social regulation or constraint. However, market excess led to disruption, reaction and a re-embedding of the economy.

Time has, of course, moved on since Polanyi wrote, and what he appeared to see as a fairly permanent constraint on the economic realm turns out to look more like a moment in a cycle. Keynesian economic policy and the Bretton Woods system decayed in the 1960s and 1970s; the final three decades of the twentieth century saw the ascendance once more of the ideology of the free market (Carrier 1997), trumpeted in books with titles like *The end of history* (Fukuyama 1992) and often given the name 'neoliberalism'. However, these decades also saw a succession of disruptive speculative excesses. Increasing public protest against the expansion of market values and relations at the expense of social ones, perhaps most visible in the form of the World Trade Organisation, coupled with increasing official concern about those market excesses, appear to mark the onset of another re-embedding, the second stage of another double movement.

Marx, Polanyi and the other great analysts of the rise and spread of the impersonal, rational economic system that is capitalism drew our attention to big changes in the relationship between economy and society. Theirs is a picture of powerful forces striding, in capital letters, across the pages of history. These are difficult to relate to anything so mundane as the shopping that is at the heart of ethical consumption. However, the changes that those analysts describe have seen reactions and accommodations that appear in more private realms, and that begin to resemble the shopper's decision to buy Fairtrade coffee rather than a different sort.

An almost invisible example of this is the way working-class families treated money in parts of the United States around 1900, described by Viviana Zelizer (1989). She says that people took their impersonal wages and physically divided them into different containers. The money placed in each was dedicated to a different household need, and so expressed the social relations and obligations of the people within it. Certainly there was more to this than just the family policing the boundary between economy and society by socialising the product of the economic realm when it entered the household. However,

equally certainly, the practices Zelizer describes effected that socialising. This tale of working-class American families and their money jars points to something important for understanding ethical consumption. The more mundane areas of life, more private than the political-economic structures that concerned Marx, Polanyi and the rest, bear the mark of the tensions between economy and society, and particularly of people's efforts to maintain a social sphere in the face of an expanding economic sphere and its products.

One anthropologist who has considered these more mundane areas is Daniel Miller, in his work on consumption (e.g., 1987) and shopping (e.g., 1998). Miller argues that people in modern societies confront a world of material objects that is alienated from them. In saying this, he echoes Marx's observation that the development of capitalism means that those who make things increasingly do so at the direction of others, who own the material they work on and the tools they use. As a consequence, the things people make increasingly are separated from the intentions and social situations of those who make them. In our terms, though not in Miller's, people increasingly see production and its fruits as part of economy, increasingly distinct from society. In Marx's terms, people increasingly are, and see themselves as being, alienated from their labour, from what they make through that labour and from the products of capitalist enterprise generally.

Miller says that people react negatively to this. I have already mentioned the more visible and violent forms of this reaction, the Luddite riots and the Revolutions of 1848, in which workers sought to reclaim control of production. Miller points to a less obvious reaction, the rise of mass consumption and shopping, as people invest less of their selves in the world of work, and instead see purchasing and consumption as the more meaningful economic activity. In it they seek to use alienated commodities, the unpromising products of the economic realm, to create personal, affective lives in the social realm. They do so through the selection of objects that, they think, will fit and reflect the social relations in which they will use those objects.

Building on the arguments that Miller made, as well as the ideas of Marx and Marcel Mauss (1990 [1925]), I have looked at one aspect of the emergence of this sort of shopping in Britain and the United States: the rise of modern Christmas in the middle third of the nineteenth century (Carrier 1995: Chap. 8), characterised by the massive, collective purchase of commodities in retail establishments, and their conversion into gifts given in social relationships, especially in the family. Taken together, the shopping and the giving reflect both the separation of economy and society and people's ability to recreate society in the face of economy, by wresting recalcitrant commodities from the economic realm and converting them into objects suitable for giving in, and reproducing, close and durable personal relationships. As Miller suggests, people do this all year. However, at Christmas they all do so at once in a stylised, exaggerated way that celebrates and reaffirms their ability to make this transformation, and so their ability to maintain society in the face of an intrusive economy.

The Luddite riots, the Revolutions of 1848, American families apportioning their weekly pay packet and the emergence of mass consumption and of modern Christmas point to ways that people have been concerned about the same thing that, I argued, is the concern of ethical consumption: economy, society and their relationship. They also illustrate an important point. In different times and places, people experience and think about economy and society differently; the relationship between the two realms differs and people seek to affect that distinction in different ways. Put in other words, a recurring set of relations and concerns can take different forms in different circumstances. This has implications for those who are interested in understanding ethical consumption. It means that they can find cases that may look nothing like ethical consumption but that are concerned with the same issues and relationships, like Zelizer's working-class money jars and the Luddites. However, it also means that cases that may look like ethical consumption at first glance turn out to be concerned with different issues and relationships.

An example of the latter is that of the Quakers, who, since the start of their religion, have advocated what looks like ethical consumption. However, Peter Collins (this volume) shows us how the moral basis of the Quaker consumption ethic reflects things other than a concern about economy and society, in their case Biblical injunction. Moreover, in their commercial activities they appeared happy to see the objects they transacted as commodities free of their context. This is illustrated by an eminent Quaker mill owner in the first half of the nineteenth century, Henry Ashworth, who said that 'cotton spinners would buy cotton from anywhere and "they asked no questions as to whether it was slave-grown or not"' (Boyson 1970: 233). The danger of assuming that what appears to be ethical consumption really is an instance of it is illustrated as well by those English people who refused to buy slave-grown sugar early in the nineteenth century. They may look like present-day ethical consumers: their buying decisions reflected their evaluation of the context of the sugar. However, without further investigation it is not clear where those people thought the wrong in slavery lay and what assumptions were at work. Were they objecting to slavery because it denied a humanity of both slave and master, because it denied religious salvation to slaves, because it denied to slaves the chance to be independent transactors selling their labour freely on the market?

Equally, I said, we need to be careful not to dismiss a practice as being unrelated to ethical consumption simply because it does not resemble it on the surface. For instance, ethical consumption does not look much like modern Christmas, with its mass buying. However, as I described, that buying is central to a collective affirmation of the ability to maintain the family as a haven in a heartless economic world. The same is true with the Luddites, whose rejection of mechanisation looks nothing like ethical consumption. However, if those machines embodied an attack on desired social values and relations by an encroaching impersonal, economic realm, then Luddites,

Christmas shoppers and ethical consumers all are concerned with the relationship between economy and society.

The different attempts to protect the social realm from the incursions of the economic are all about the same basic issue but, as I have observed, those incursions take different forms at different times and people respond to them differently. With ethical consumption, the incursion appears to be the intensification and geographical expansion of economy, whether in reality or in people's perceptions. The intensification appears as the increasing rationalisation of economic activity of all sorts, from agricultural production to the staffing of shops, in the pursuit of greater profit; the expansion appears as the increasing reliance on manufacture and agriculture carried out elsewhere, intruding economic values in places where they are assumed to be alien and to have undesirable effects. The response is an effort to slow or even reverse this process through the preference for objects that embody the values threatened by that incursion, a preference manifest in shopping and passed up the chain through the signalling system.

Comparative Issues

In the preceding paragraphs I approached ethical consumption in terms of an important part of its context, which is the cultural distinction between society and economy. As I said, doing so is rewarding, for it allows us to see ethical consumption as one of a number of ways that people have sought to protect the social realm from what they see as an encroaching and threatening economic realm.

Seeing ethical consumption in terms of that cultural distinction, and particularly as a collective commentary on the relationship between economy and society, raises questions. The first of these concerns goals: what is the proper relationship between economy and society that is sought? The second concerns means: what ought to be done to achieve that goal? The third is agents: who are the people who can work to achieve that goal, and how ought they to be related to each other and to the realm that they seek to affect? I turn to these now.

I will address these questions by placing ethical consumption in a different context, that of other social movements and bodies of thought concerned with the relationship between economy and society. Doing so helps illuminate the set of decisions, whether conscious or not, that ethical consumption involves, decisions about what people want, how they ought to achieve it and who or what ought to do the achieving.

Goals

Ethical consumption contains an image of what economic activity ought to be like and how the economic realm ought to reflect or differ from the social

realm. Also, though perhaps less obviously, it contains an image of what the social realm is like. Part of understanding ethical consumption is understanding these images, and placing it in a comparative framework allows us to see other views of economy, society and their relationship, and how ethical consumption resembles or differs from them.

People can, for instance, prefer that their relations with the economic realm be distant and impersonal. These are the sort of relations implicit in organisations such as the Consumers' Association (now 'Which?') in the UK and the Consumers Union in the US, which encourage people to see objects for sale dispassionately, in terms of value for money. In this they construe objects as bundles of utilities or use value, bereft of personality or sociability in either their production or their sale (see Carrier 1995: 120–2). There are many reasons to want this impersonality.

To begin with, if people want, as Miller argues, to create social worlds with the commodities at hand, they may find it easier to do so if the commodity and the purchase are impersonal, are blank slates on which the purchaser's identity and social relationships can be written easily. Impersonality in economic relations has a further attraction, particularly apparent to those obliged to live without it. Often enough, poor householders have wanted to be free of personal relationships with shopkeepers on whom they rely for credit and who can break them when times are bad. Equally, many people have been attracted by impersonality of the sort illustrated by Montgomery Ward, a mail-order firm in the US. They proclaimed that they cared only about the impersonal transaction of object for cash. As they said in their 1876 catalogue, 'We sell our goods to any person of whatever occupation, color or race' (in Hendrickson 1978: 222).

My examples suggest that sociality in economic interchange may be desirable only to those who routinely conduct their economic lives free of it. The social realm may look rather different to those for whom economic transactions necessarily occur in the context of social relations, such as the poor family needing credit from the local shopkeeper or the Black man confronting merchants who are more concerned with the colour of his skin than with the colour of his money. Such people may see virtues in an impersonal economic realm that are not apparent to ethical consumers, with their different experiences of economy. If so, they are in good company. Their view, that the economic realm ought to be independent of the social, flourished in Western thought at the time when the economic and the social were not so separated as they are for the social strata where ethical consumption flourishes (e.g., Hirschman 1977; Silver 1990). So, the attraction that a more socialised economy has for ethical consumers may reflect the fact that, for them, sociality in economic activity is optional rather than necessary.

In contrast to those who prefer anonymity in economic activity, ethical consumers think that at least some of their economic relationships ought to be personal. This appears in the old Fairtrade slogan about 'cutting out the middleman'. For people with this view, producers and consumers ought to deal

directly with each other, which accounts for some of the attraction of buying directly from local producers such as farmers. Again, the Fairtrade organisation illustrates this, with its images of producers of Fairtrade-certified products, whether on their website (www.fairtrade.net) or on the bags of coffee on the supermarket shelf, such as is described by Peter Luetchford (this volume). The Fairtrade organisation is not alone in this. A growing number of companies are introducing schemes that allow purchasers to go on a website, enter a code and locate the farmer who grew what they bought. These companies include producers like Dole, for the organic bananas they sell in the US, and retailers like Waitrose and Tesco in the UK (Stone and Richtel 2009).

Direct trade between producers and consumers is not new, but has been the experience of most people for most of human history. Furthermore, direct, local trade has long been valued. In many parts of England it was enshrined in regulations that made it difficult for outsiders to trade and that required producers to offer their wares to local householders before seeking to sell elsewhere (Carrier 1995: 64–5). This valuation, however, often reflected an assessment of the more economic advantages of direct trade, rather than the more social ones. So, many would have agreed with the criticism of intermediaries expressed by one American pamphleteer early in the nineteenth century: ‘their meer *handing of Goods one to another*, no more increases any Wealth in the Province, than Persons *at a Fire* increase the *Water in a Pail*, by passing it thro’ Twenty or Forty hands’ (in Crowley 1974: 88). Even Adam Smith, that symbol of impersonal economic rationality, had little time for intermediaries in trade, arguing that, compared to farmers and manufacturers, they did little to increase the wealth of the nation (Lubasz 1992: 49).

Of course, the disparaging of intermediaries in ethical consumption is associated with economic value: those who grow Fairtrade-certified products have a financial inducement to do so. However, for ethical consumers the appeal of direct trade is not economic: that inducement, after all, increases the wealth of the producers’ nations, not the consumers’. Rather, it seems to spring from the distinctly social desire for equity, fair dealing between maker and buyer, of the sort that was common in colonial America. ‘It was the traditional view that exchange ... was a social matter involving reciprocity and redistribution: competition, in the sense of one man’s gaining at the expense of another, was a violation of this traditional ethic’ (Crowley 1974: 6). A different value arising from the social realm also seems to make direct trade appealing. Items acquired directly from the producer carry that producer’s identity. One wheat farmer, who sells to a milling company that allows purchasers to identify the farm that grew the wheat in the bag of flour that they bought, put it this way: ‘The person who puts that scone in their mouth can now say, “Oh my God, there’s a real person behind this.” ... They are going to bite into that bread or pastry and know whose hands were on the product’ (Stone and Richtel 2009). This reduces the impersonality of objects, and so can make them better suited for use in social relationships (see Carrier 1995: Chap. 6).

The value that ethical consumers put on personality and direct trade is relatively easy for them to realise. Unlike the household confronting an overbearing butcher or baker, most ethical consumers do not confront real makers of what they buy. This allows them to construct these producers as congenial people who share their values. The farmers who grow the organic crops can be construed as doing so not for impersonal commercial reasons, but for reasons that are more deep-seated, 'thought to be internal to the individual' (Barnett and Silverman 1979: 51). They can be construed as living the organic life that, as Audrey Vankeerberghen (this volume) describes, many ethical consumers value. Similarly, the smiling smallholders who grow the coffee can be imagined as producing for Fairtrade because they embrace the values, rather than because, as Luetchford (this volume) describes, they want a better position in the international coffee market. And, of course, those who buy ethical fabrics made by Bangladeshi women can assume that those women are grateful for paid work that empowers them, rather than, as Lill Vramo (this volume) describes, seeing that work as a shameful public recognition that their households do not have the resources to be self-reliant.

It appears, then, that ethical consumers preferring direct trade and other consumers preferring impersonal trade may well want the same thing, that the objects in their lives not be impersonal commodities. However, their approaches differ. Ethical consumers seek objects that already carry identity, that of their makers. The others seek impersonal objects that they can stamp with the identities and social relationships with which they will be associated. Both, however, differ from those for whom personality in economic relations signals subordination, whether poor families confronting merchants on whom they rely for credit or merchants confronting rich customers on whom they depend for trade (McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb 1982: 198).

It is worth noting that the preference for direct trade helps explain why buying locally overwhelmingly means buying food grown locally and why Fairtrade sales overwhelmingly are of foodstuffs. Unlike trousers, books and hard-drives for computers, these are things that can be imagined and presented as having been produced by a person, whether the local farmer who delivers vegetables to your door, the smallholder pictured on the bag of ethical coffee or the farmer you see on a web page. This preference also helps explain one aspect of the nimbyism in ethical consumption mentioned earlier: the fact that ethical consumers generally do not seem very concerned about the conditions of work of the clerks who stock the store shelves or the drivers who deliver the crate- and pallet-loads from warehouse to shop; that they appear unconcerned that Starbucks, which advertises its ethical concerns, violates United States labour law to prevent its staff joining a union (Greenhouse 2008). Those people are parts of the web of intermediaries that stands between producer and consumer.

Means

In different circumstances, those with different views of the two realms can deal with the relationship between economy and society in different ways. As I have described already, people wanting to protect the social sphere from the encroachments of the economic could socialise money in the way of Zelizer's working-class families with their money jars, or celebrate their ability to impose social meanings and relationships on impersonal commodities through modern Christmas. Such activities protect the social realm by socialising the products of the economic. They do so, however, in different ways. Unlike Zelizer's money jars, Christmas stresses the importance of shopping, and so resembles ethical consumption.

I have already pointed to another way that shopping can be used to tame the economy, which is the approach to objects illustrated by the Consumers Union and the Consumers' Association. That approach polices the boundary between economy and society by treating objects as impersonal material utilities. In doing so it helps strip objects of the social images that advertisers, creatures of the economic realm, seek to impose on them. This is a more subtle form of policing, because those images are themselves part of the social realm, rather than the economic: when advertisements associate a commodity with affection and a happy household, they are appropriating social values for economic ends. Those who read these words may see that appropriation as an unexceptionable part of life. However, not that long ago it caused dismay, visible in works like Vance Packard's (1957) *The hidden persuaders*. That book was an extended complaint about the use of 'motivational research' in advertising. Packard's concern, translated into my terminology, was that advertisers were taking values that emerged in the social realm and using them to manipulate people in ways that reflected values in the economic realm (as in, e.g., Sunderland and Denny 2007).

There are, then, different ways in which purchaser choice can be used to affect the relationship between economy and society. Those who urge the dispassionate approach are as concerned with that relationship as are those who want to find just the right gifts in their Christmas shopping, and they are just as concerned as those who buy ethically. However, there is one important matter on which they differ. Only ethical consumption is overtly concerned to inject into the economic realm values that spring from the social. To do so, it makes use of two central elements of the economic realm: the desire of companies for the greatest profit; the relationship between sales and profit. The result is a fusion of economic and social values, revealed in the words of Penny Newman, at the time head of Cafédirect, a British company that sells Fairtrade-certified coffee: 'If you want to change the trading system you've got to be on the same terms as the conventional system. You need to make a profit' (in Martinson 2007).

In effect, Cafédirect is part of the signalling system that I mentioned previously, and the profit that it makes is part of the signal. Remember that

when buyers select one object over another, they emit a signal about their preferences among the objects that they confront. So, for instance, when buyers select Fairtrade-certified coffee at £2.40 for a half-pound bag over other coffees on offer that are priced between £1.85 and £2.20, those buyers are emitting a signal that says that they will pay more for coffee produced in a particular way than they will for coffee that is not, a signal realised in the profit of companies like Cafédirect. This can be put in more formal terms. Firstly, the morals of ethical consumers, which arise in the social realm, shape the value that those people put on the different objects that are for sale. Secondly, those values affect the price that those consumers are willing to pay for those objects. Thirdly, this affects which of the objects they buy, and which they do not. Fourthly, those purchases convey the signal that goes up the chain from shop to wholesaler to manufacturer. When manufacturing firms attend to this signal and shape their practices accordingly, the values of ethical consumers are injected into the economic realm. At least, that is the assumption. As I show later on, in practice things are not so straightforward.

Agents

I said that the third of the issues I would describe is the agents who work to achieve the proper relationship between economy and society: how they ought to be related to each other and to the realm that they seek to affect. And again, different sets of people, with their different concerns with the relationship between economy and society, have stressed different sorts of agents and of relationships among them.

One early, modern view of such agents and their relationship emerged in the cooperative movement. This began to flourish in Britain in the middle of the nineteenth century: by the 1880s there were over a thousand cooperative societies with more than half a million members (Jefferys 1954: 17). The power of this movement to affect the economic realm and its relation to the social did not rest on individuals choosing freely in their personal economic transactions, any more than the power of the labour movement rested on individuals choosing freely in their personal negotiations with their employers. Rather, like the labour movement, it rested on organisation, in this case the cooperative societies, which were (and remain) corporate bodies that set up cooperative retail stores linked, eventually, to cooperative wholesale organisations. The cooperatives relied on the people who belonged to them and who bought in their stores. However, their power sprang from the organisations that united those people: it was those organisations that acquired premises, located sources of supply and purchased, transported and sold things.

Moreover, the cooperatives did not seek to affect the economic realm by modifying one or another company or commercial practice. Rather, they created economic institutions to serve their own purposes. This makes them unusual, for most other efforts to address the relationship between economy

and society have sought to influence the operation of existing institutions, rather than create new ones. I have already mentioned one such effort, the Keynesian economic policies that were designed to affect companies and markets in order to restrict what were seen as their harmful effects. With few exceptions, they did so without creating novel economic institutions. While the advocates of Keynesian policies differed from the cooperative movement in this way, they resembled it in another. They saw institutions rather than individuals as the appropriate agent, though for Keynesians it was governments representing citizens, rather than cooperative societies representing members.

Like most Keynesians, then, and unlike the cooperative movement, ethical consumption does not seek to shape the relationship between economy and society by creating new economic institutions. There are, of course, organisations associated with ethical consumption, such as the Fairtrade Foundation and the Soil Association. However, they set standards and certify companies and objects that meet them; they do not trade. In this, they are perhaps best seen as part of the signalling system, for their standards and certifications make more visible the signals generated when ethical consumers make their purchases. Or, as the chair of the Environmental Information subcommittee of the House of Commons put it, 'An effective environmental labelling regime will ... generate the kind of market signal needed to trigger a transformation in business activities all the way down the supply chain of a particular product' (in Watt 2009).

While ethical consumption differs from the cooperative movement and resembles the Keynesians in its reliance on existing economic institutions, it stands opposed to both in another way. Unlike them, it sees individuals, not institutions, as the source of efficacy in shaping the relationship between economy and society. This efficacy springs into being when an individual chooses to buy one thing rather than another, and it is expressed through the aggregate of market transactions, rather than through meetings of the local cooperative society or national elections. The sort of individual who has this efficacy has been called a 'citizen-consumer', and this name captures nicely the mixture of public (citizen) and private (consumer) elements in ethical consumption. Citizen-consumers deploy their personal resources, their money, in ways that, they think, will help them achieve their more public, social goals and their more personal, material satisfaction.

Comparing Goals, Means and Agents

I have sketched the goals, means and agents of different sets of people and bodies of thought concerned with the relationship between the realms of economy and society. As I said, my purpose was to help reveal what is contained in ethical consumption by putting it in the context of other ways that people have sought to address the relationship between those realms. My comparisons

have touched on many issues, but what I have said indicates that ethical consumption appears both to reject and embrace the economic realm.

The rejection lies in the goal. Ethical consumption seeks to replace the impersonal calculation and task orientation that is part of the economy with personality: objects that are made not by machines or robot-like wage labour in companies seeking the greatest profit, but by people who invest themselves and their values in what they produce. People link themselves with those producers when they purchase and consume their products, so complementing personality with sociality. The personality is, as I have indicated, only an image, for it relies on third-party representations (see below) or, at best, on brief, commercial interactions. The people portrayed on the bag of Fairtrade coffee are likely to live a very long way from the purchaser and their lives are likely to cross in no discernible way. Even the farmer who sells local produce is likely to have no other link to the purchaser than those sales. It is, thus, only an image, but perhaps imagination is the closest to the real thing that people can get in a system with extensive division of labour and long-distance trade.

Although ethical consumption rejects the economic realm in its goals, it appears to embrace economy in its means, as in the Norwegian embrace of 'trade, not aid' that Vramo (this volume) describes. That is because the better lives and worlds that ethical consumers want are to be achieved through the existing institutions and practices of the economy. In adopting, even stressing, purchasing decision as the key to achieving its goals, ethical consumption necessarily accepts the market as the vehicle for the expression of morality, whether in the form of the transaction between purchaser and retailer or the transactions further up the chain that extends back to the producer.

Ethical consumption does not embrace economy only in its means. In addition, it embraces, or at least does not challenge, economy in its agents. In stressing individual purchasers and their decisions, ethical consumption echoes the idea that in the economic realm people are not linked to each other in any substantial or durable way, but only temporarily in terms of the task at hand. That stress also reflects a central element in the dominant, public ideology of the market, the individual choosing freely, described by Carrier and Wilk (this volume). It reflects as well, of course, a central element in neoliberal thinking, that is, that risks should fall on individuals who buy, who are able to reduce those risks by choosing wisely, rather than falling on companies that make and sell, which are able to reduce them by conforming to public regulation (this is elaborated in Moberg and Lyon 2010). There is, then, nothing substantial in ethical consumption that would encourage the organisation and collective action to achieve common goals that is alien to the economic realm. Moreover, the potency of these agents does not spring from things that are important in the social realm, like their personal identities and relationships. Rather, it springs from their command of that most powerful symbol of the economic realm, money.

Practical Context

Thus far I have considered aspects of the context of ethical consumption that can help us to understand the common factors that drive ethical consumption generally as a social phenomenon. However, ethical consumption is more than just an expression of those common factors, because it is more than just a general social phenomenon. That is because that general phenomenon is manifest by concrete sets of ethical consumers who are influenced by their concrete, practical, social context, and who engage in practical actions that shape and are shaped by that context. These practical contexts are the concern of the balance of this Introduction.

Ethical consumers do not float in some undifferentiated space, but exist in particular places and times. This means that even if they all share a concern with the relationship between economy and society, the concerns of any particular set of ethical consumers and the ways that those concerns are expressed will be influenced by factors that may not influence other sets. Similarly, ethical consumption involves engaging in practical actions that are at the intersection of people's values and the context in which they purchase and consume objects of different sorts. Attending to these practical contexts illuminates ethical consumption in terms of a question different from those addressed thus far: in what ways do these contexts shape the appearance of ethical consumption and its effects?

Specificity

I have said that understanding specific sets of ethical consumers requires attending to features of their time and place that influence their general concern with the relationship between economy and society. Because these are specific to concrete sets of people, they resist ready, systematic summary, a resistance apparent in the diverse Hungarian ethical consumers that Tamás Dombos describes in his chapter in this volume. Here, then, I will only illustrate the sorts of things that can be important, drawing on some of the material in different chapters in this volume.

The first is the way that historical experience can affect how people think about the relationship between economy and society and express those thoughts in ethical consumption. The significance of that experience is illustrated by Lill Vramo's chapter on ethical consumption in Norway. As she notes, that country has had an enviable international reputation and a history of significant aid to poorer countries. However, over time and for reasons partly beyond Norway's control, Norwegians decreasingly have seen themselves as generous donors aiding grateful recipients. Instead, more and more they see themselves as foolish givers confronting crafty takers. While this change is not unique to Norway, it is especially significant there because of the country's earlier commitment to aid. This historical circumstance finds expression in

ethical consumption, the embrace of 'trade not aid'. Superficially, that embrace appears to entail a strengthening of the economic, in the form of international commerce, at the expense of the social, in the form of assistance to the poor. However, as Vramo shows, for many Norwegians that embrace reflects a desire to make economy more moral.

National history has a different sort of effect for some of the ethical consumers in Hungary that Dombos describes. Perhaps because of the shock of the collapse of the old Communist system, its reverberations and the betrayal of dreams that followed it, some Hungarians embrace ethical consumption as a criticism of public life. One form this takes is as an assertion of personal morality in a society increasingly seen as populated by amoral opportunists. Another form is the adoption of ethical consumption as a criticism of the alliance of government and business that many see as running and ruining the country. In extreme form, as Dombos describes, this results in an ethical consumption that is intensely nationalistic, intended to restore national pride and spirit in a country seen as permeated by and subservient to foreign interests.

Distinctive historical effects, albeit on a smaller scale, appear in what Giovanni Orlando says in his chapter on a group of ethical consumers in Palermo, in Sicily. For them, the significant experiences revolve around the growth of the city in the second half of the twentieth century. This was not, however, desired urban development. Rather, it was seen as driven by greedy, corrupt speculators who were happy to take control of public land without permission and build on it without approval, and who were associated with Mafia and Christian Democratic party interests on the island. In all this, city, provincial and even national governments were unwilling or unable to intervene. These experiences led the people Orlando describes to want to protect the social realm from the predations of economic interests, but also led them to think that conventional political activity was pointless. Instead, they turned to ethical consumption as an expression of their values, and to the passing of ethical goods on to others as a way of spreading those values. Here, then, as with the national case Vramo describes and some of the Hungarians that Dombos describes, the vagaries of historical circumstance help us to understand the different ways that ethical consumption reflects a concern with economy and society.

A different sort of factor appears in Amanda Berlan's chapter, one more purely cultural than historical. She is concerned with public perceptions of the ethical status of cocoa, especially claims that much of the chocolate that people buy is tainted with child labour and something akin to slavery. She illustrates this with the position of Cadbury's, a large British chocolate company. She notes that Cadbury's is often included in the list of ruthless and exploitative firms, even though they have a history of fairly responsible, even ethical, policies. That inclusion points to the importance of a common assumption, that large companies are unethical. This ascription has some validity, but remains problematic because large companies are hostage to their very size.

They are more likely than small ones to attract public scrutiny and be visited by government inspectors, and if they are caught in illegal or unethical practice, they find it hard to do what small companies can, change the name on the letterhead and resume trading. In pointing to this and other cultural assumptions, Berlan shows how expressions of people's concern with the relationship of economy and society are shaped not only by their cultural understandings of these two realms. Those expressions can be shaped as well by presuppositions of other sorts that are part of ethical consumers' context.

A factor of yet a different sort deserves consideration, one that springs from the importance attached to consumption in modern Western societies. That is the social costs that can be associated with various types of ethical consumption and that can influence the actions of ethical consumers. Two chapters in this volume address somewhat different aspects of this, Peter Collins's, concerned with Quakers, and Cindy Isenhour's, concerned with Swedes.

I said that Quakers probably should not be considered ethical consumers of the sort that has been discussed in this Introduction. Even so, some of what Collins describes is pertinent, particularly the position of prosperous Quaker merchants and manufacturers in England around the middle of the nineteenth century. That position illustrates the social pressures that people can experience when their consumption is unusual. Put briefly, the economic position of these Quakers should have led to their incorporation into the upper reaches of the middle class. However, their plain Quaker consumption meant that they did not appear or act in ways that would allow them to mix easily with many of their economic equals. They found it hard, then, to claim the social rank that their prosperity justified, with the result that many of them abandoned their Quaker faith and its plain consumption.

What Collins describes points to the importance of consumption, ethical or otherwise, in social life. This is illustrated by some of the Swedish ethical consumers that Isenhour describes. They approached ethical consumption in different ways than did Quakers, with different social effects. Many of the more committed among them, however, confronted the problem of Collins's prosperous Quakers: their consumption cut them off from many of the people with whom they normally would expect to interact. As Isenhour explains, in Sweden there is strong pressure to consume at a fairly high level, which makes the position of ethical consumers there more difficult than that in many other countries. However, contextual factors of the sort that Collins and Isenhour describe are likely to shape ethical consumers' practices everywhere to some degree. This is illustrated by some of the Hungarians that Dombos describes. A recurrent theme in their talk is the resistance they encounter when they argue for ethical consumption among family and friends, and the fear of some that such argument would produce rejection and the weakening of valued social relationships.

The points that I have made here complicate the way that I rendered ethical consumption in the previous parts of this Introduction. This complication is an extension of a point made earlier, that a concern with economy, society and

their relationship will take different forms in different settings. What concerned me previously in this Introduction was settings that differed in terms of the predominant forms of economy and society. The preceding paragraphs, on the other hand, were concerned with settings of another sort, historical and cultural factors that are not overtly about economy and society but that can influence the ways that people understand the relationship between those two realms and the ways that they act to affect it.

I turn now to a different set of contextual factors. These are not important because of how they can influence the orientation of ethical consumers. Rather, they are consequences of the practice of ethical consumption, especially once it has become a recognisable social and economic activity. Not only are these factors of a different sort than those considered previously in this section, their effects are different as well. They are worth attention because they help show how complicated and problematic ethical consumption is.

Signalling Ethical Consumption

Those who favour ethical consumption seek to communicate their preferences. I have already noted how their purchases communicate by means of the economic signalling system. In addition, when they communicate their preferences to others through their consumption practices, they are also part of a social signalling system. This complicates ethical consumption, because much of it is not immediately visible, and hence does not signal very clearly. A cup of coffee looks like a cup of coffee, and does not proclaim itself as Fairtrade or not. To make matters worse, much ethical consumption, especially that intended to protect the environment, involves foregoing consumption: the flight not taken, the old car not replaced, the new clothes not bought. As Collins's chapter reminds us, of course, contemporary ethical consumers are hardly the only people to confront this problem, nor are they the first.

One way of dealing with this complication is straightforward: people can become conspicuous ethical consumers. This is obvious with things that blatantly announce their morality, such as the bag that proclaims, in large letters, 'I am not a plastic bag'. Somewhat more subtle is a product sold by the Scotmid Co-operative stores where I live, which advertise their commitment to ethical products. It is an inexpensive cotton bag that is advertised as Fairtrade. It is recognisably ethical because of the small trademarks it bears and because it looks like undyed, coarse-woven cloth, the sort of thing that characterises simplicity. There are, of course, other products that attest to the ethics of the purchaser. The social activist Bono established a charitable scheme called 'Product (RED)' (Ponte, Richey and Baab 2008). Companies that join it can label their wares accordingly, without actually changing their commercial practices, and purchasers can signal their morality by displaying them.

There are yet more subtle ways that ethical consumers pass messages through the social signalling system. For instance, an increasing number of

people and companies in the US are installing small wind-turbines to generate electricity and so reduce their use of fossil fuels. These are less efficient than solar panels, whether used to generate electricity or to produce heat, and appear to produce less energy than advertised (Jowit 2009). However, they do have an advantage. 'Perched high above a building, wind turbines serve as a far more visible clean-energy credential than solar panels, which are often hard to see' (Galbraith 2008). Their visibility makes them attractive. A senior administrator of Harvard University said that the turbines that his institution is installing are 'outward symbols of our commitment to renewable energy and sustainability here on campus' (in Galbraith 2008).

Forms of consumption less visible from the street can signal ethical concerns in other ways. In her discussion of Swedish ethical consumers Isenhour describes one, protecting the environment by buying old objects instead of new. People who do this for ethical reasons and who want to signal their morality will, of course, need to distinguish themselves from those who buy second-hand simply because it is cheap. Some of the Swedes Isenhour describes do this by the careful selection of old objects that are not yet antiques. In doing so, they select objects of high quality that are aesthetically pleasing, but that are not genuinely old and rare. A similar quiet signalling is the purchase of 'authentic' foodstuffs, most visible in the Slow Food movement. Those are certified as produced in the locality with which they are associated historically and in ways that are traditional and artisanal rather than rationalised and capitalised (Pratt 2007). As Cristina Grasseni (this volume) describes, such produce rejects the economic realm in favour of the social in two ways: it is free from the taint of industrial agriculture; its purchase supports traditional rural ways. The consumer's commitment to the values associated with authentic foods can be made visible through involvement in things like the Slow Food movement: buying in the right shops, cooking with the right recipes, attending the right festivals (Severson 2008).

Isenhour's and Grasseni's descriptions of ethical consumption show how ethical consumers' signals convey information about class and taste, as well as ethics. This is not the conspicuous consumption of the leisure class that Veblen (1927: 87) describes, which is a sign of wealth, the 'unremitting demonstration of the ability to pay'. Rather, it resembles Weber's view of status groups, distinguished by 'the principle of their consumption of goods as represented by special "styles of life"' (Weber 1978 [c. 1914]: 937, emphasis omitted). This is the approach that Bourdieu (1984) elaborated in *Distinction*.

For Bourdieu, taste entails two kinds of distinction. The first is distinction among the different things available for consumption: *coquilles St Jacques à la Provençale*, as opposed to tinned spaghetti loops. The second is distinction among people with different consumption preferences: those who know the difference and care, as opposed to the ignorant and indifferent. As this suggests, for Bourdieu taste is social.

To begin with, it is only when people's preferences are recognised by others that they cease to be idiosyncrasies and become tastes. This social recognition is facilitated by the fact that people's preferences are not random. Rather, they are primarily the result of cultural transmission from their social milieu, initially when they are growing up and learning the distinctions that make for taste. Because learning these distinctions takes time, and because acquiring items to be consumed takes money, those from milieux higher up the socioeconomic scale will acquire tastes different from those lower down. Put crudely, taste is a function of class, and the power of the dominant classes means that theirs are the dominant tastes. However, the common assumption that taste is a personal matter masks this, and people's preferences often are seen to reflect their better or worse taste, rather than their different class locations. As this suggests, the preferences of those in lower strata are denied legitimacy, just as some of the Swedes that Isenhour describes thought that their modest consumption led others to deny their legitimacy. Their taste is seen to be impoverished or inadequate, rather than different.

Because consuming ethically is a preference, like taste, what Bourdieu says in *Distinction* may apply to ethical consumption. When people signal their ethical preferences, they are expressing a set of values that is shaped by their social milieu. However, the importance of milieu, what Josée Johnston (2008) calls the political economy of ethical consumption, will be masked by the claim that ethical preferences are an individual matter. At the simplest level, ethical products tend to cost more than others, so that ethical consumption is easiest for the rich, which echoes what Bourdieu says about tasteful consumption. Moreover, because of their social influence, it is their ethical preferences, expressed through their consumption, that will be recognised as ethical. The consumption of the rest, like some of the Hungarians that Dombos describes, will be seen to be devoid of ethics rather than being seen to express different ethics that reflect different social locations and resources. This is echoed in what Orlando says of ethical consumers in Palermo in his chapter. They saw the consumption of the poor as not being ethical, which they explained as the result of ignorance or of a lack of money. By seeing divergence as the result of ignorance or poverty, rather than as dissent, these explanations serve to solidify the values of ethical consumers and make them legitimate.

In this, Orlando's ethical consumers echo what seems to recur in ethical consumption. People's ethical preferences are a function of their milieu, and especially their class, as I illustrated in my discussion of why people of different class positions would place different values on sociality in economic transactions. Indeed, sociality and other values associated with ethical consumption look rather like what Bourdieu (1984: 77) calls 'the tastes of luxury ... the tastes of individuals who are the product of material conditions of existence defined by distance from necessity'. However, the ethical values involved often are presented as being self-evident and beyond debate. How, after all, can one oppose helping impoverished farmers in the Third World or

saving the environment? In being constructed in this way, ethical consumption leads to what Bourdieu calls 'misrecognition', treating tastes that reflect people's social locations as instead reflections of natural moral sensibility. In this, ethical consumption 'tends to produce ... the naturalisation of its own arbitrariness' (Bourdieu 1977: 164).

Ethical Consumption Commerce

The second consequence of ethical consumption that I consider revolves around what happens when it is sufficiently common that companies take notice of it and it becomes an element of commerce. This touches on central elements of ethical consumption. For one thing, if companies take notice it means that the economic signalling system is working, which would justify seeing individuals transacting in the market as the appropriate agents to affect the relationship between the economic and social realms. Further, if those companies bring their commercial practices into line with the values of ethical consumers, this would justify seeing existing economic institutions and values, especially the profit motive in a competitive market, as the appropriate means for affecting that relationship. Some might, of course, argue that companies need to change because their values change, rather than merely to maintain their profit. However, it seems difficult for a movement that embraces the capitalist market as its main means, to complain when companies in that market are motivated by profit.

More fundamentally, however, it is not clear that the appearance of ethical consumption commerce will produce results that accord with the values of ethical consumers, a disjunction between ethical ends and market means considered in Moberg and Lyon (2010). Of particular concern here is the assumptions concerning the signalling system and the individual purchaser as agent which underlie ethical consumption. These rest on a further assumption, that purchasers are reasonably able to assess objects in terms of their ethical criteria. That assumption is uncertain for a number of reasons, including the preconceptions of consumers that Berlan describes in her chapter. Here, I am concerned with a particular set of reasons, the processes at work within the very market that ethical consumption embraces, processes that reduce the likelihood that purchasers will be able to make reasonable assessments of the ethical nature of what is for sale. These range from the straightforward to the complex.

At the simplest level, companies that want to engage in ethical consumption commerce, that want to sell to ethical consumers, can describe their products accordingly, without regard for how much such a description is justified. Commercial deception is nothing new and remains fairly common. Two cases will illustrate this. Firstly, the Advertising Standards Agency, in Britain, ruled that it was misleading to advertise the Renault Twingo as an 'eco' car with low CO₂ emissions because it is, in fact, one of the most polluting cars of its size (Pearce 2008). Secondly, the Securities and Exchange Commission, in the

United States, charged Pax World, one of the leading American companies running ethical mutual funds (unit trusts), with violating its advertised ethical investment standards; the company paid a \$500,000 fine and loosened the standards (Lieber 2008).

This desire of companies to appear more ethical to consumers than they are in fact is not reducible simply to greed and chicanery. It also has a systemic cause, the economic signalling system. This does not link companies only to customers. It links them to investors as well, and they appear to send rather different signals. A study released early in 2008 found that when US companies announce their corporate commitment to 'sustainability' their share prices fall. One of the authors of the study said: 'The pattern was clear — the more aggressive the goal, the more the stock price fell' (Deutsch 2008). Thus, while ethical consumers may want 'sustainability' as a company strategy, the investors who drive share prices do not, and those prices are taken as the key indicator of company performance and affect the pay of senior management.

Ethical consumers who are aware of such commercial practices and, hence, distrust claims that companies make about what they sell, are likely to find themselves in the position of some of the Swedes that Isenhour describes in her chapter. They were concerned especially about their impact on the natural environment, and the conscientious among them spent a lot of time trying to discover the likely consequences of different sorts of purchases. In doing so, they confronted what some call 'green noise' (Williams 2008), a host of urgent and often contradictory messages about the environmental effects of different products and practices (see, e.g., Bhanoo 2009; Navarro 2009; Vidal 2009). In economists' parlance, ethical consumers trying to decide what to buy confront very high information costs.

In such situations it is reasonable for ethical consumers to seek some organisation that they can trust. In her chapter, Vramo points to this trust in her description of an ethical shop in Norway and the people who buy there. The shop sold products that had been designed in Norway and produced in Bangladesh under ethical conditions. In their public statements, the shop adhered to the notion of 'trade not aid', and said that the products were sufficiently attractive to compete with normal commodities. Shop customers appeared to see things differently. They told Vramo that they were relieved to buy there: they had an organisation that they could trust to make the ethical judgements. While this tactic is understandable, it has pitfalls. Just like Renault and Pax World, indeed like every business, Vramo's shop needs customers, and that need can lead companies to focus more on ethical image than on ethical practice. This seems to be the case with the Whole Foods supermarket company in the United States (Johnston 2008) and, as I have noted already, with Starbucks, whose ethical image is contradicted by their efforts to deny their employees the right of free association. Once again, then, commercial practices make the ability of consumers to assess the ethical status of objects uncertain.

Those who want to simplify deciding what to buy can, of course, fall back on certification schemes, such as that of the Fairtrade Foundation, the Soil Association or Slow Food International. However, not all certification systems are alike, and it can be hard to discover which ones are trustworthy. This is illustrated by the Ethical Trading Initiative (www.ethicaltrade.org), an attractively-named certification scheme that has a number of large companies as adherents. The scheme's standards are reasonably high, but it is not clear how much they are enforced: as of late in 2006, when the scheme had been running for some time, no company had been denied certification for failure to conform (van der Zee 2006; see also Smithers and Smith 2009). Similarly, the US Department of Agriculture is, under 1990 legislation, supposed to inspect foods labelled organic on a random basis to assure that they meet the legal definition of 'organic'. However, according to a report by the Department's Inspector General, no such inspections were carried out between 2006 and 2008, and enforcement of standards was lax to the point of being nonexistent (Neuman 2010).

To compound the problem, some certification schemes allow manufacturers themselves to decide if their products meet the criteria. This seems to be the case with the EnergyStar system in the US, run jointly by the Department of Energy and the Environmental Protection Agency (Wald 2010). Apparently, 'companies that make refrigerators, washing machines, dishwashers, water heaters and room air-conditioners ... can certify those appliances themselves' (Wald 2009). Independent certification, however, does not necessarily solve this problem, because firms often rely on private companies to inspect them. Those companies are subject to, and may succumb to, commercial pressure to keep their fees low and their rate of favourable inspection reports high (see, e.g., Moss and Martin 2009; Seversen and Martin 2009).

The existence of schemes like the Ethical Trading Initiative and EnergyStar does not mean that there are no reliable certification systems with reliable inspection systems that offer reasonable protection against chicanery. However, even the existence of honest and honourable systems does not resolve the problems that ethical consumers face. For one thing, the criteria of certification can change without being noticed. In her chapter on organic agriculture in Belgium, Vankeerberghen describes a change in 2007 in the EU criteria for certification of food as organic. Many Belgian organic farmers objected to the change, arguing that it relaxed the standards and weakened the distinctiveness of the category. They argued also that the relaxation came about because the growing demand for organic food had attracted large-scale food companies, and that they were the driving force behind the new criteria. While these changes attracted some public interest, they were likely to be invisible to most ethical consumers, who, understandably, focus on the label rather than the details of what it means.

To make matters even more difficult, reasons to relax certification standards may in fact accord with the values of many ethical consumers. This possibility

is presented in Cristina Grasseni's chapter in this volume, on ethical consumption in Italy. She describes the case of Bitto, a cheese distinctive to an alpine area in Lombardy. This cheese had been assigned a Protected Designation of Origin by the EU. Demand for the cheese increased and the body that oversaw the designation allowed the gradual expansion of the area in which it could be produced, as well as a change in its composition. These changes, invisible to someone facing the cheese in a supermarket, altered the nature of what Bitto cheese is. However, those advocating the changes put forward arguments that would make sense to many ethical consumers. The cheese is produced in a depressed, mountainous region. Expanding the authorised area would allow more people to produce it, and so help secure their economic position. The change in its composition allowed for a greater substitution of cow's milk for goat's milk, benefiting local dairies, which were in decline. Both of these changes, thus, would sacrifice authenticity, but would improve the economic prospects of a region that had been becoming poorer for decades.

In their different ways, however, both of these chapters remind us that to focus on changes in certification criteria that are relatively invisible to consumers is to miss a larger point. That is, certification itself can impose a rational impersonality that ethical consumers often reject. Vankeerberghen, for instance, describes the ways that those who have long produced organic food see it as reflecting a way of life and a set of understandings and values concerning the relationship among food, nature and people. For them, the formal criteria of certification are a betrayal, for they ignore these values and relationships, being concerned instead only with the technical aspects of agriculture. Under them, the decision to produce organic lettuce, for instance, becomes simply a commercial judgement guided by market rationality. Grasseni makes a similar point in her chapter. She says that local food, a reflection of producer and place that is expressed in the Fairtrade picture of the smallholder on the package, has changed in ways that reflect the expansion of ethical consumption commerce, and has done so in ways that many ethical consumers would reject. With the spread of certification schemes and growing demand, food that is produced locally in a way that reflects local people's resources and needs becomes displaced by a global category, 'local food', that encourages uniformity and market appeal.

The certification systems that Vankeerberghen and Grasseni describe raise yet another, and more subtle, challenge to the ability of ethical consumers to assess products for sale adequately. Although they involve much more than the fundamentals of competitive commercial practice, such systems rest on them: like the firms that inspect a processing plant to see if it qualifies as organic, companies that produce and sell Fairtrade-certified commodities want the profit, as the head of Cafédirect said. To get it they need sales, and to get sales they need to do more than be ethical: they need to appeal to customers. That need points to a further complication in ethical consumer commerce, and involves something I call 'ethicality' (Carrier 2010).

Ethical consumers want to buy things that satisfy their values. Those values are, of course, abstract. An ethical coffee drinker, for instance, might want coffee that is non-exploitative, produced in a way that does not exploit the growers. 'Non-exploitative', however, is not something that exists concretely in the world. Rather, it is an abstraction that is applied to practices in the world. Because it is an abstraction, it needs to be made 'legible' (Scott 1998), visible and recognisable to those concerned with it. A simple example of this legibility is found in something that Peter Luetchford describes in his chapter, the pictures of growers, typically smiling people of markedly ethnic aspect, that appear on bags of Fairtrade coffee and on the Fairtrade Foundation website (www.fairtrade.net).

These images may, to continue the example, be selected by people in the Fairtrade organisation or the companies that roast the coffee to represent non-exploitative coffee production. However, their selection is shaped by more than how well they represent that production in any objective sense. For one thing, the images need to be recognisable to potential purchasers as representations of concepts like 'non-exploitative', which is another way of saying that they need to make 'non-exploitative' legible. This means that those who select the images need to take into account people's preexisting assumptions, even if dispassionate analysis shows that those assumptions are not particularly valid. So, if people believe, as Berlan's chapter indicates, that small is likely to be more ethical than large, or that the presence of working children is immoral, then the images selected for the coffee bag need to reflect those beliefs if they are to be recognisable to potential purchasers.

Moreover, these recognisable images have to be attractive: they have to portray things with which the potential purchaser would be happy to be associated. So, for example, someone who looks like a self-reliant smallholder likely would be preferable to someone who looks like a migrant labourer or wage worker, even though all are part of producing Fairtrade-certified coffee (e.g., Luetchford 2008; Lyon 2009). The selection of these images, then, is shaped by what the selectors think are the values and assumptions of potential customers, and by what they think will be attractive enough to generate sales. And if those selectors are wrong, their coffee will not sell: they will have to pick other images or go out of business.

These images, then, are intended to make 'non-exploitative coffee production' legible in an appealing way. However, they end up being more than that. Very few of the people who see the picture on the bag know much about growing and processing coffee, about patterns of social and economic relations in places where coffee is grown or about the operation of roasters and certifying organisations, the sorts of things that Luetchford describes in his chapter. So, while they may have a sense of what 'non-exploitative' means in the abstract, they are unlikely to have an independent way of deciding whether or not a particular instance of coffee production is non-exploitative. In this circumstance, it is reasonable to expect that people's assumptions of ethicality,

of the moral nature of coffee production in this case, will be defined by the numerous images that they see, especially when those images are associated with reputable bodies like the Fairtrade organisation. So it is that our ethical consumers come to define ethicality in terms of the things that make it legible, the repeated photographs of smiling smallholders that they see on bags of Fairtrade-certified coffee, photographs themselves shaped by the economic pressures that affect coffee companies.

There is nothing very mysterious about this process, by which representations of ethicality become the basis of its definition, nor does it require that those consumers are especially gullible. It is, after all, no different from figuring out what 'cat' means by seeing a hundred things that people call cats. The result, though, is that social values that appear to be opposed to the values and practices of the economic realm end up being shaped by them and so reflect them. At the same time, the images and the associated texts assure purchasers that the makers of the things that they buy share their values. Those recognisable and attractive makers are portrayed as wanting the same personal link between maker and consumer as do ethical consumers, as wanting the same sorts of things in their lives, and as seeing economy, society and their relationship in the same way. In the process of this sort of representation, and for good commercial reasons, the local beliefs and values of ethical consumers in Europe and North America are transmuted into something found among right-thinking folk everywhere.

Conclusion

Every analytical approach to social life is an act of naming, and every name is partial. To call what I am writing with 'a pencil' is partial, for it points to some things and ignores others. However, the point of analytical approaches, like the point of names, is not to be complete, which is not possible in any event. Rather, it is to be useful.

The analytical approach to ethical consumption that I have used in this Introduction certainly is partial. Among other things, it ignores the effects of ethical consumption on retail sales and CO₂ emissions; it ignores the effects of ethical consumption on the domestic lives of consumers; it ignores the ways that ethical consumption can echo old colonial views of the world; it ignores the range of political engagements of those who buy Fairtrade coffee or organic vegetables. I have ignored these things because they do not seem very helpful in achieving the goal that I have sought in this Introduction. That is to consider ethical consumption not in its uniqueness, but in terms of its commonality with other social processes, movements and sets of beliefs.

I have pursued this by placing ethical consumption in an important feature of its social context, the cultural understanding of economy and society as distinct realms of people's lives and of society more generally. As I have noted, this sort of

understanding is not purely cultural, purely contemporary or purely Western. It is not purely cultural: I have noted how it also reflects the organisation and practices of the production and circulation of things, as it also reflects people's experiences of these. It is not purely contemporary: I have shown how it is a recurring feature of public life since the rise of capitalism, attested in the intellectual realm by writings of Marx and Weber and in the social realm by the Luddite riots and the Revolutions of 1848. It is not purely Western: as Parry and Bloch argue, it is a feature of many societies around the world.

Approaching ethical consumption in this way does not only help us to understand it by seeing it in terms of larger, long-standing issues and processes. It also helps us to approach it critically. One way it does this is by letting us relate it to other efforts to address the relationship between economy and society. This makes possible what I have only sketched in this Introduction, consideration of the ways that the goals, means and agents of ethical consumption compare with the goals, means and agents of those other efforts. With this comparison we can begin to see not only what ethical consumption embraces, but also what it foregoes.

Seeing ethical consumption in terms of the relationship between economy and society facilitates a second critical approach illustrated in this Introduction. That is to see it in terms of the social and economic practices in which it exists and which it seeks to affect. As I have shown, those practices can create problems as ethical consumers seek to signal their morality to others. As I have also shown, they can raise questions about the assumption that market transactions are an effective way to bring about the changes in the economic realm that ethical consumers want.

As I indicated in this Introduction, and as the chapters that follow indicate in their different ways, ethical consumption is not just buying morally. In spite of its stress on individuals making ethical choices, it is not understandable in terms of the choices that they make in supermarket aisles. Rather, it is a complex and problematic activity, not least because the abstract idea of buying morally will be realised in different ways in different contexts. It is only by exploring those contexts and that complexity and considering the ways that it is problematic, by looking at what it ignores as well as what concerns it, by understanding not just its core actions but also its unintended associations and effects — it is only by exploring all these things that we can begin to consider what ethical consumption is, what it tells us about ourselves and the world, what it can and can not do.

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