Abstract

This paper reviews some of the recent literature in Geography and related disciplines on ethical consumerism and political consumption. Many geographers began their engagement with questions of ethics, politics, consumption and consumerism inspired by critical theory, commodity chain analysis and a sense that geographical knowledge might have a central role to play in progressive social change. Since these early engagements, it has been established that consumption practices are rarely the practices of rational, autonomous, self-identified consumers, and so-called ethical consumption practices are rarely detached from organisations and their political activity. Over time, therefore, some researchers have gradually shifted their focus from consumer identities and knowledge to consumption practices, social networks, material infrastructures and organisations of various kinds. This shift in focus has implications – both for the field of political consumption and for how the discipline of Geography relates to this field.

Introduction

The concepts of ethics, politics, consumption and consumerism are often found together. Consumption is approached as a practice ordered by moral sentiments most famously in the work of Adam Smith (Sayer 2003), but also more recently in convention theory (Raynolds 2002, Renard 2003) and cultural economy (Amin and Thrift 2004). Since the birth of capitalism in the late eighteenth century, the productivity, rationality and general moral character of consumerism – a consumerism often associated with materialism and luxury – have been discussed and critiqued by puritans, Marxists and many others less easily labelled (Gabriel and Lang 1995, Hilton 2003, Lears 1998, Miller 2001, Sayer 2003, Thompson 2001). Since the late nineteenth century, consumption has been the subject of political debates and confrontations between consumer capitalists interested in abundance and excess, and co-operators interested in thrift and utility (Gurney 1996); between advocates of the American Marshall Plan in post-war Europe, and those suspicious of the materialistic and individualistic form of consumerism it implied – whether Communist sympathisers in France or members of the British Labour Party steeped in the politics of austerity (de Grazia 2005, Kroen 2006); or between the emerging global regime of water welfarism advocating the liberalisation and commodification of water, and local authorities in countries like New Zealand keen to resist such moves (Morgan 2006).

In recent years, some commentators have viewed consumption as a medium through which to construct an ethical life in conditions of relative freedom (e.g. Douglas 1996) and/or relative risk (Al-Rafee and Cronan 2006, Brinkmann and Lentz 2006, Steenhaut and Van Kenhove 2005). In this context, prominent current debates articulate questions of consumption and consumerism with questions of overseas development (Miller 2001), environmental sustainability (Crocker and Linden 1998, Wilk 2001) and obesity (Cafaro et al 2006). It is these current debates – and such related fields as fair trade, green consumption and clean clothes – that provide the point of focus for this review paper.

Alongside other social scientists, geographers are engaged in these current debates. One reason for this is that, as for other social scientists, questions of ethics, politics, consumption and consumerism litter our personal and professional lives, as we read the weekend newspaper, shop for groceries, or attempt to understand twenty-first century capitalism using concepts like alternative economic spaces (Leyshon et al 2003) and alternative food networks (Marsden 2000,

Goodman 2003, Holloway et al 2007, Renting et al 2003). Another reason for the engagement of geographers in these debates, however, is that many geographers see a role for geographical knowledge in the regulation of production through consumption (however direct or indirect this regulation might be – a point I return to below). Inspired by the critical theory of David Harvey (1990) and Daniel Miller (1995), many geographers wonder whether commodity chain research could defetishise commodities, allowing consumers to see the consequences of their actions, to alter their actions accordingly and, by doing so, to encourage producers to take action in areas such as labour conditions and environmental performance (see Hughes and Reimer 2004). This commodity chain approach shares something with a prominent approach in Business Studies, Management Studies and Marketing Studies (see Berry and McEachern 2005, Dickinson and Carsky 2005, Smith 1990). This latter approach can be summarised in the following formula: consumer values + information = consumer action (where 'consumer values' are usually taken as given, 'information' stands in for geographical knowledge, and 'consumer action' is meant to result in producer *re*action). At the time of writing, both of these approaches share something with that of policymakers in the United Kingdom, the country in which this paper was written.

Over the last few years, however, some geographers (among other scholars) have come to identify and critique the models of ethics and consumption implied by this family of approaches (see Barnett, Cafaro et al 2005, Barnett, Cloke et al 2005, Hobson 2002, 2003, 2006). These critiques identify three assumptions associated with consequentialist or teleological models of ethics: that people can know the consequences of their actions (an action such as purchasing a pair of jeans); that people can adjust their actions in the light of such knowledge (by purchasing an alternative pair of jeans, or by not purchasing a pair of jeans at all); and that people *will* adjust their actions in the light of such knowledge. These assumptions are based on two further assumptions: that people act autonomously (and so can adjust their actions relatively easily in response to knowledge); and that people are happy to accept personal responsibility for what are often thought of as 'global problems' such as child labour or deforestation. None of these assumptions have survived unscathed from recent theoretical and empirical scrutiny. Consumption practices have been found to be social, habitual and, therefore, difficult to change (Warde 2005). In addition, people have been found to refuse personal responsibility for 'global problems', not least because they believe that other agents are better placed to address such problems, whether those agents be national governments or just other individuals with other roles and capacities (Barnett and Land 2007, Hobson 2006, Malpass, Barnett et al 2007).

As a result of these critiques, some new approaches to ethics, politics, consumption and consumerism have emerged among geographers and others. These alternative approaches comprise the subject for the rest of this paper. As a literature review, therefore, the paper is selective rather than exhaustive. It is not a review, for example, of all recent research in, say, agro-food studies – although it strays into this field which has much to say about the production and consumption of organic food. And it is not a review, for example, of all that is known about the general relationship between politics and consumption – although it strays beyond the discipline of Geography on occasion, since to do otherwise would be to conceal the interdisciplinary character of the field. In the next section, I discuss a shift of focus in parts of the literature from consumerism to consumption. In the section after that, I discuss a corresponding shift in focus from ethics to politics. I conclude the paper by identifying some implications of this shift from ethical consumerism to political consumption.

From consumerism to consumption

In recent years, with others, many geographers have learned that individual choice has but a small role to play in explaining consumption practices (see Clarke, Hallsworth et al 2006, Jackson et al 2005). In particular, this has been learned from Daniel Miller (1998), whose ethnography of consumption practices among residents of North London uncovered few egoistical, self-indulgent, narcissistic consumers, and many people embedded in social relations, whose consumption practices were directed towards the needs, desires, and concerns of others, and unfolded, therefore, against a background of multiple and often contradictory obligations, duties and expectations. That individual choice has but a small role to play in explaining consumption practices has been learned also from a group of sociologists (see Groncow and Warde 2001, Shove 2003, Van Vliet et al 2005, Warde 2005) for whom consumption practices are habitual and routine at least as often as they are particularly rational and conscious; for whom consumption practices are usually shaped by material infrastructure (e.g. store location); and for whom consumption practices are often steered by 'higher order' practices (e.g. supporting a football team, which can lead to moments of consumption such as the purchase of a match ticket or the purchase of a replica shirt). Connected to this, scholars studying (the possibility of) sustainable consumption appear increasingly to eschew any broad focus on generalised consumer choice for a narrower, sharper, more specific focus on 'selection' – the relatively trivial choice between relatively similar options on, say, a supermarket shelf (see Gabriel and Lang 1995). Or they focus on 'consumer lock-in' – when consumers find it difficult to change their consumption practices, given the social relations, domestic routines and material infrastructures in which such practices are embedded (see Jackson and Michaelis 2003). Or they focus on 'choice sets' – collections of interconnected acts of consumption, the behaviour that comes with them, and the production and infrastructure that supports them, within which choices are made, usually to the exclusion of other options (see Levett et al 2003).

The paragraph above provides one view of the shift away from consumerism and towards consumption among some anthropologists, sociologists, geographers and others. Another view is provided by research on so-called 'ethical consumerism'. Studying fair trade consumption, Clarke et al (2007) found that people buying fair trade products think of themselves less as consumers and more as activists, campaigners, Christians etc. And organisations selling fair trade products approach their customers less as consumers and more as members of social networks based around sites like churches and schools. Studying the strategies of organisations involved in 'ethical consumerism', the same researchers found that, rather than providing information to autonomous individuals happy to accept personal responsibility for global problems, the more successful of these organisations tend to approach people as socially and geographically situated beings, with concerns that range from personal debt to climate change, and with a capacity for sophisticated moral reasoning about their own roles and responsibilities in relation to these concerns (Barnett et al 2008, Malpass, Barnett et al 2007). Approaching people in this way, these organisations seek to *persuade* them to take action, not by providing information, but by providing narrative storylines that acknowledge the complexities of modern subjectivity, while connecting them up to themes of inequality and exploitation (Littler 2005).

Indeed, narrative has taken centre stage in a variety of recent discussions about ethical action. In the USA, Lynne Henderson has advocated the introduction of narrative into court proceedings so that judges might empathise more with victims, witnesses and defendants; while Martha Nussbaum has called for the introduction of narrative into multicultural education in order to call up such 'narrative emotions' as compassion (see Woodward 2004). Regarding

studies of commodity chains by geographers, a similar call has been made by Ian Cook (Cook et al 2006a) who notes that such studies tend to work best, at least with an audience of students, when they provoke empathy through evocative description of both the experiences of producers and the emotional and political journeys taken by researchers themselves. Such evocative description thrives on contemporary technologies: the Internet, the documentary film, the art exhibition (Cook et al 2006b, Miller 2003).

Considering the role of narrative in ethical consumption, some commentators feel uneasy about this reworking of the commodity – a very different project to that of defetishising the commodity. For Guthman (2003, 2004), organic food comes with its own mystifications. Its counter-cultural image hides poor labour conditions, the unpaid feminised labour that accompanies 'slow food', and the oppressive body norms that accompany 'health food'. These mystifications, she argues, allow civil protest and citizenship to be conflated with consumption choice and profit-making. Regarding fair trade consumption, Bryant and Goodman (2004) identify a dominant narrative of producers working hard on second nature ('the noble savage') which obscures the implications of fair trade for gender relations in producer communities. Similarly, regarding green consumption, they identify a dominant narrative of tropicality (wilderness, jungle, rainforest) which obscures the violence and inequality sometimes found in producer communities. Even when the relationship between these narratives and empirically specifiable reality is discounted, an uneasiness remains among some scholars. Recent research with consumers has found that many people now distrust assurance schemes for their numerousness and use of logos in the same way that many people distrust large corporations (Eden et al 2008).

The agro-food studies literature has been particularly strong on connecting this uneasiness about the role of narrative in reworking the commodity to broader critiques of so-called alternative agro-food networks (Goodman 2003), which many researchers approach as expressions of alternative social imaginaries that contest mainstream, corporate, industrial agro-food systems, and proceed to question their capacity in this regard (ibid). Freidberg (2003), for example, notes that supermarkets in Britain support the stories they wish to tell about their 'ethical' products by imposing codes of conduct on production in southern Africa. She views these codes of conduct as attempts to 'clean up' Africa, which remind her of colonial projects to prevent contagion and expand markets for soap and other products in colonial Rhodesia and elsewhere. She reports that many of the additional costs associated with these 'ethical standards' are being met by southern African producers and not British supermarkets. That narratives of commodities rest on the certification of various standards by third parties has been discussed at length by Julie Guthman in her studies of organic agriculture in California (Guthman 1998, 2002, 2004, 2007). Certification agencies charge fees and tend to favour, therefore, well-capitalised producers. The fees themselves depend on the price premium achieved by organic food, which in turn depends on its scarcity – an outcome of certification, and a barrier to the spread of sustainable agriculture. Certification agencies also compete with one another for these fees. As a result, they tend to shy away from demanding too much of producers, and to focus on enforceable standards. It is this focus on pre-set standards that particularly concerns Dupuis and Goodman (2005). For them, a reflexive politics of alternative food systems would focus less on such standards and more on the political processes by which decisions about food come about democratically.

Political processes and democracy are two items discussed in the next section of the paper. Before moving on, however, a brief summary of the first two sections is necessary in

order to bring the focus back from alternative agro-food networks in general to ethical consumerism and political consumption in particular. There has been a shift in focus among some geographers and others in recent years from consumerism to consumption. This shift is based on empirical research that has found consumption practices to be socially and geographically situated, and so-called ethical consumerism to involve organisations that approach people as members of social networks, with multiple and sometimes competing concerns, and with a capacity for moral reasoning. These organisations provide people with narrative storylines to persuade them to act differently, and practical devices to enable different actions. They do not, on the whole, approach people as autonomous consumers in need of information. A corresponding shift in focus from ethics to politics is identified in the next section.

From ethics to politics
In recent years, some geographers (and other social scientists) have learned from historians and others that questions of ethics and consumption tend to get brought together by political movements and organisations. Trentmann (2006) notes how the language and identity of 'the consumer' did not coincide with the early modern transformation in the world of goods, but became activated only in the nineteenth century when it was discursively strengthened by agents in civil society who were responding to the behaviour of private water monopolies and a perceived threat to national culture from advancing globalisation. For McGovern (1998), in the years leading up to the 1930s, the Great Depression, and the New Deal, two professions articulated consumption and citizenship in the USA. The first was advertising, which sold goods by equating consumers with citizens, purchasing with voting, and consumption with democracy. The second was product testing and consumer advertising. During the 1930s, Roosevelt's New Deal strengthened the emerging figure of the 'citizen consumer' through its Consumer Advisory Board, Office of the Consumer Council, and support for co-operatives (Cohen 1998). In the UK, the figure of 'the consumer' became mobilised between the 1950s and 1970s as the psychological sciences, and especially the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, provided advertisers with understandings of human individuality, personality and psychology (Miller and Rose 1997). In this context, some students of contemporary developments have learned to approach 'the ethical consumer' as something assembled – or at least stabilised – by retailers, nutritionists and market researchers (Lockie 2002), or by social movement organisations (Clarke, Barnett et al 2006, Harrison 2005), or by a combination of national authorities, business interests and NGOs (Jacobsen and Dulsrud 2007). They have learned to approach 'ethical consumption', therefore, as something that involves organisation and mobilisation i.e. the stuff of politics. These practices may be those of the state, as when the Japanese Government sought to control inflation and boost production in post-war Japan by shaping consumption through savings policies and educational campaigns (Garon 2006), but equally they may be those of international organisations, private companies or civil society organisations (Brewer and Trentmann 2006).

This line, that what we call ethical consumption in the UK is also (maybe even primarily) *political* consumption is best developed, unsurprisingly, among certain political scientists (e.g. Micheletti 2003), for whom markets constitute political arenas and political consumption describes a citizenship and political involvement for times characterised by individualisation, transboundary problems, and crises of governability and legitimacy. Political consumption can be viewed from at least two perspectives. By some commentators (e.g. Bauman 1999, Needham 2003), it is seen as a cause and/or expression of some contemporary democratic crisis because

consumption is seen as something undertaken by autonomous individuals in the private realm. But by at least one group of political scientists (see Follesdal et al 2004, Micheletti 2003, Micheletti et al 2004, Stolle and Hooghe 2004), it is seen as an expression of democratic maturity or renewal. It is seen as a form of political participation that is non-bureaucratic, low-threshold, and attractive, therefore, to non-traditional groups such as women. In addition, it is seen less as a challenge to strong government and more as its compliment, since political consumption only emerged to deal with governability weaknesses, and it helps to raise skills, consciousness, and trust among citizens. Some recent studies by geographers have helped to bolster this second view. Through a survey of attitudes and behaviour in Britain, Pattie et al (2003) found that people who engage in what they call 'individualistic activism' (e.g. selective purchasing) are no less likely to engage in 'contact activism' (e.g. letter writing) or 'collective activism' (e.g. meeting attending). Through a survey of what-to-buy guides, Clarke, Barnett et al (2006) found that authors tend to present political consumption less as a substitute for other forms of political participation and more as a supplement to these other forms. The same researchers have argued that political consumption organisations lobby local authority procurement officers, buyers in retailing corporations, and policymakers at the national and international levels at least as much as they lobby individual consumers (Malpass, Cloke et al 2007; see also Levi and Linton 2003). Indeed, individual consumers and institutional actors are very much interdependent in the strategies of political consumption organisations. The successful lobbying of procurement officers, buyers and policymakers rests in part on media attention, and this in turn rests on newsworthy sales figures for so-called ethical products (Clarke, Barnett et al 2006, Clarke et al 2007).

All of this leaves the question of why, in the UK at least, we continue to favour the term 'ethical consumption' to describe fair trade consumption, organic consumption, clean clothes consumption etc. One reason may be that, until recently, we have failed to recognise the political character of such consumption – the way in which such consumption is *organised and mobilised by social movement and other organisations*, and the way it acts as *a medium through which commitments are registered, policymakers lobbied, and claims made on legislators*. These are the two main senses in which consumption is held to be political in this paper. Another reason may be that we have *wanted* consumption to be ethical, in that we have wanted it to involve rational and relatively autonomous individuals; to involve choices, decisions and (moral) reasoning; and to be shaped by knowledge or narratives of consequences (whether good or bad), norms (whether right or wrong) and/or virtues. These are the main senses in which consumption is often held to be ethical. A third reason for the continued use of the term 'ethical consumption' may be that social movement organisations have used the term strategically in order to lose any baggage carried by the term 'political'. Connected to this, it is interesting that in Scandinavia the term 'political' is commonly used to describe fair trade and related forms of consumption. This is partly because many Scandinavians working this field are political scientists by training. But it may also be that 'politics' carries less baggage as a term in Scandinavia than it does in, say, twenty-first century Britain. This last point leaves a further question: where are the comparative studies of political consumption one might expect from those trained as geographers? Cross-country or cross-cultural studies of consumer 'ethical beliefs' are relatively common in Business Studies (e.g. Cui et al 2005, Auger et al 2007, Rawwas et al 2005). That corresponding studies are relatively rare in Geography is surprising (though see Hughes et al 2007), at least to those outside of the discipline with views on its role within the academic division of labour.

From political consumption to…
In the first three sections of this paper, I have reviewed some of the literature in Geography and related disciplines on ethical consumerism and political consumption. I have suggested that many geographers began their engagement with research problems such as fair trade consumption inspired by the critical theory of David Harvey and Daniel Miller, the toolkit of commodity chain analysis, and a sense that geographical knowledge might have a central role to play in progressive social change. And I have suggested that, since these early engagements, some geographers have learned from anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists – and their own empirical research, of course – that consumption practices are rarely the practices of rational, autonomous, self-identified consumers, and so-called ethical consumption practices are rarely detached from organisations and their political activity. The argument I have made is that, over time, a number of geographers and others working this field have gradually shifted their focus from consumer identities and knowledge (i.e. ethical consumerism) to consumption practices, social networks, material infrastructures and organisations of various kinds (i.e. political consumption). I now turn to the implications of this shift, both for thinking about (and maybe even shaping the course of) developments in political consumption, and for Geography as a discipline keen to have something original to say about such developments.

The first thing to say here is that recognising political consumption *as* political consumption sheds a different light on certain contemporary preoccupations of professionals, activists and academics working the field. One of these preoccupations has acquired for itself the label of 'mainstreaming' and reflects a concern about how to expand the market for ethical products while at the same time preserving their ethical character. Usually the argument made for expanding the market is that more fair trade purchases will equate to more production and development (in places where people would welcome such things), or more 'clean clothes' purchases will equate to more production in 'no sweat' factories (and less child labour, intimidation of union officials etc.). This argument assumes that political consumption – or, rather, ethical consumerism – works directly through the market, and leads to the question of how many ethical products must be sold before development is achieved, or sweatshops are no more. The magnitude of this question, and the challenge any realistic answer represents, can be paralysing. But a focus on political consumption changes the question. It recognises that political consumption works not only directly through the market but also indirectly through local, national and international regulatory bodies. It changes the question from how many ethical products must be sold before, say, development is achieved, to how many ethical products must be sold before legislators are persuaded to act in such areas as trade or labour conditions. This question could be less paralysing.

Yet to argue that political consumption, by virtue of its political character, is not an entirely appropriate target for economic critique, is to open political consumption to critique on political grounds, for which political success and failure, legitimacy, transparency and accountability are relevant criteria. Reviewing decades of research findings, Charles Tilly (2004) concludes that successful political claims tend to be made by groups able to display worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment ('WUNC displays'). If we approach political consumption as a movement, and evaluate it against Tilly's criteria, we find that political consumption scores well on worthiness, less well on unity (given disagreements between fair trade and organic campaigners, for example), better each year on numbers (given sales figures for ethical products), but less well on commitment (given the oft-discussed 'attitude-behaviour

gap' – see Chatzidakis et al 2007). So challenges remain if the target is political success leading to indirect regulation of the market., whether these challenges reflect the (lack of) commitment of those voicing support for political consumption, or what Freidberg (2004) calls 'the internal politics' of the ethical sourcing movement. Challenges also exist from the perspective of democracy. It is often said that shopping is not like voting. In most democracies, one person gets one vote. This is not the case with political consumption, through which it is possible for people rich in financial and other resources to register their commitments more forcefully than others. Of course, this is a wider problem for governance, which may have emerged when government became problematic towards the end of the twentieth century, and may involve new forms of participation and inclusion, but also lacks such socially agreed rules of government as 'one person one vote' (Swyngedouw 2005).

A second preoccupation of people working the field of political consumption is a concern about how to make good or right choices in a world of multiple and sometimes incompatible models of ethics (teleology, deontology etc. – see Barnett, Cafaro et al 2005), and also multiple and sometimes incompatible 'global problems' (poverty, climate change etc.). Again, recognising political consumption *as* political consumption sheds new light on this 'ethical dilemma' preoccupation. Firstly, that people are concerned about how to make good and right choices – that consumption has been problematised – is an achievement in itself. Second, given that models of ethics and global problems are multiple and sometimes incompatible, we should not be surprised that ethical dilemmas exist, and nor should we assume that they can be easily resolved. But, third, these dilemmas pose a problem for political consumption insofar as political consumption is a claims-making movement keen to display not only numbers but also worthiness, unity and commitment (see above). These are some implications of the shift outlined in this paper for thinking about developments in political consumption. I turn now, finally, to some implications for how the discipline of Geography relates to this field.

As we have seen, recognising political consumption *as* political consumption presents problems associated with political success/failure and also democracy. One of these problems is the problem of access – the problem of how many people get to buy ethical products and to which social groups these people belong. When this was discussed in a session at the Annual Meeting of the Royal Geographical Association with the Institute of British Geographers in 2007, the discussion focused on social class as the main variable explaining access to ethical products. This would not be surprising, given the price of many ethical products, if this was not a discussion among geographers, who one might expect to approach consumption as a set of practices embedded in social networks, higher order practices, and *material infrastructures* – who one might expect to approach the problem of access to organic vegetables, for example, with questions about how far people live from farm shops, or whether organic vegetable box schemes deliver to houses and flats/apartments in equal measure. These are the kinds of questions asked in geographies of retailing or even industrial location (see Wrigley et al 2003). These geographies have something to contribute to the field of political consumption.

Other geographies with something to contribute include comparative studies of political consumption in different national contexts (see above) and geographies that conceive of consumption not just as shopping but also as product use and disposal. It is the context of climate change and environmental sustainability that makes what Barnett, Cafaro et al (2005) call 'the ethics of consumption' (where consumption is approached as an object of moral evaluation) at least as important as 'ethics and consumption' (where consumption is approached as a medium for moral action). Much of the literature reviewed in this paper is concerned with

'ethics and consumption' – with the problem of how to connect up consumers and producers. But the context of climate change and environmental sustainability presents the problem of how to connect up consumers and their waste (see Hawkins 2006). I am aware of little geographical research on this problem (though see Gregson 2007).

As a concluding point, it is worth stating clearly that none of the arguments made in this essay should be taken to imply that (Marxist) political economy has no further contribution to make in the field of political consumption. It may well be the case that consumption practices do not shift easily in response to commodity chain analyses. But it is also the case that cut flower chains have consequences for women workers in Kenya (Hale and Opondo 2005), and expensive systems for monitoring organic production have consequences for small producers and their communities in Mexico (Mutersbaugh 2002). These things are important for geographers to know, not so much because we might emancipate ordinary individuals with such knowledge, but because we might take such knowledge to social movement organisations or policymakers, who practice claims-making or regulation not against a background of social networks, domestic routines, and material infrastructures (as do ordinary people practicing consumption), but, at least in theory, with more deliberation than that (Barry 1995).

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