

ETHICAL CONSUMPTION: RESISTANCE OR REDEMPTION?

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Introduction

Ethical consumption is a phenomenon that gained strength at the end of last century. It had risen in the context of the consumer society, as a reaction against the social and environmental harm caused by mass consumption and market practices, and as a result of the increased awareness of the power of the consumer (Fontenelle, 2006). Known as ethical consumption, political consumption, sustainable consumption and other terms depending on the dimension that one wants to explore, the act of shopping (or not shopping) in which are implicit the concerns with the social and environmental impacts it may cause (Harrison et al, 2005. APUD Fontenelle, 2006) has entered the circles of political sciences, philosophy, sociology, psychoanalysis and anthropology.

Within these circles and their different lenses, criticism and positive positions over ethical consumption are confronted with many questions:

- What motivates the consumers' ethical behavior? Guilt, responsibility, will of changing the market practices, affirmation of identity, self-determination?
- Is tethical consumption a political act? If so, is it effective for it means?
- What are the motivations and the impacts of ethical consumption in an unequal world?
- Who is generating the demand for ethical products: the market or the consumers?
- Is the market commodifying resistance to create new 'niches'?
- How far the power claimed by the ethical consumer recovers the individual political voice over the failure of representative democracy? Is it not the same act to hold someone else accountable for their conduct?

The empirical approaches of the scientific works revised to this paper face these questions by focusing on the analysis of the motivation of the consumer, on the narrative of both market and consumer, on data of the inequality between and within producers and consumers. Those empirical approaches, and also the theoretical essays analyzed, isolate the ethical consumption act as the action of shopping in a fancy fair-trade or eco store, or to choose certain products moved by a care-on-distance principle.

This paper aims to problematize both the criticism and the positive positions over ethical consumption encountered on the revised literature by arguing that the debate should go beyond the act of shopping in a store and of care-on-distance principles. First, the core points of the academic debate will be summarized. Then, examples of other acts of ethical consumption will illustrate how the core divergence between critical and supporters can be engaged.

The academic debate

Ethical consumption has recurrently being described as a resistance act that takes place as a reaction against the market, but also as a reaction against the failure of traditional representative democracy. According to Bryant & Goodman (2004), in the context of “the quiescence of political and economic leaders, consumption is a way in which individuals seek to 'make a difference'. The consuming body thus becomes the frontline as everyday acts - eating, bathing, shopping or dressing, for example - are politicized.” But is ethical consumption resistance or redemption?

The supporters of ethical consumption as a political act claim it as resistance, as affirmation of the power of individual choice to directly interfere and transform market’s predatory practices. Some advocates for the everyday life insurrection, the power of change the world by changing yourself (Tormey, 2007). Bryant et al (2008) identify authors that accentuate how caring across space through alternative sustainable consumption can open up new political, cultural and economic opportunities, creating awareness on the distribution problem. Klein (2002 APUD Fontenelle, 2006) and Micheletti (2003 APUD Jacobsen & Dulsrud, 2007) point out the importance of the sovereign citizen-consumer in redefining traditional institutions.

The current that criticizes ethical consumption questions all these points. Part of the critics has a clear Marxist heritage and starts with the core assumption that one could not use the market as an instrument of change of market practices. Coming from this assumption, are more refined arguments based on the concept of cultural capitalism that characterizes the second (or post) modernity. This perspective claims that the market assimilates resistance, through it commoditization (Maniates, 2001; Bryant & Goodman, 2004; Jacobsen & Dulsrud, 2007). Ethical consumption, then, would not promote true resistance, autonomy, choice or participation.

Based in the “illusory autonomy” formulated by Adorno, some scholars adopt a production of consumption perspective for which consumer culture is an effect of capitalism as a mode of production (Fontenelle, 2006; Dollan, 2002). Since the consumer culture is a product of capitalism and resistance is commodified, the consequence is an “uncritical acceptance of consumption as a core strategy (...) that is hardly about behaving in a systematically different manner that might substantially alter the political or economic status quo” (Bryant & Goodman, 2004).

Going further and adding psychoanalysis lenses, some critics formulate that the narrative emphasizing the human and individual responsibility over the environmental problems and social disparity of the world had internalized blame on the self as a consumer (Sassatelli 2006 APUD Jacobsen & Dulsrud 2007; Fontenelle, 2010; Maniates, 2001). The ethical consumer is then seeking for redemption (Fontenelle, 2010) and the market gives them that in the form of charity (Zizek, 2009 p34-35) or commoditizing it.

On the matter of participation, pearl of supporters of ethical consumption against the failure of representative democracy; the critics state that there is no substantial difference between voting in somebody to be accountable for yourself and the consumption act. In both there is a lack of direct participation. The consumption act is a “voting at the check out” that holds a company accountable for the consumer conduct (Maniates, 2001; Jacobsen & Dulsrud, 2007).

Fontenelle (2010) then links delegation and redemption problematics:

“Consumers do not need to worry about consuming products that have already brought the assurance that he made the right choice: when consuming environmentally friendly products he could free himself from guilt because someone would have been responsible for it.”

Or as Maniates (2001) postulates:

“In our struggle to bridge the gap between our morals and our practices, we stay busy—but busy doing that with which we’re most familiar and comfortable: consuming our way (we hope) to a better America and a better world.”

Bryant et al (2008) and Jacobsen & Dulsrud (2007), based on empirical research add a new remark to the debate: the matter of meaning of ethical consumption among different cultures, social, political and mediatic contexts. The meaning of ethical consumption is

contingent, reflecting moral negotiations. It has to be compromised against other everyday considerations and highly legitimate concerns, framing the actual options available for choice (Jacobsen & Dulsrud, 2007).

Moving beyond individuals act

A first output of balancing the interpretations described above is that ethical consumption initially emerges from the will of individuals of making difference. Whether this will is a capitalist product, an awareness of individual power and responsibility or a search for redemption, is a highly fertile debate. The questions then are: Is it making difference? Can it possibly make any difference?

When considering the ethical consumption as the act of shopping in a fancy store or buying a fair trade product produced in a far away poor community, the temptation is to answer no. Shopping for certified coffee that travels miles consuming oil to reach the final ethical consumer that can pay for the higher cost socio-environment friendly product in a store in Germany that sells an eco-fair-trade-brand that pays fair prices for the poor-hard-working producer in Colombia; has (at least) two problems. First: this is not direct participation, this is an uncritical act of delegation based on market mechanisms (Dubuisson-Quellier & Lamine, 2008). Second: since the percentage of the population that can afford daily choices for ethical products is low, there is no pressure on market practices; instead there is an enforcement of a new market niche. On this chain, the choice for an ethical product results less in resistance than in redemption.

On the other hand, when considering the direct market, networks between consumers and producers, it is possible to recognize a fissure being made on the market system. Direct market bypasses market mechanisms, in an act of empowerment of consumer and producer (Dubuisson-Quellier & Lamine, 2008), a political act. Networks connecting consumers and producers foster the ethical consumers to get involved in collective and political choices related to economic rules and their environmental consequences (Dubuisson-Quellier & Lamine, 2008). A widespread example of such a network is the local food network.

In Rio de Janeiro city, a network named Rede Ecológica is a case of direct market network. The marketed products are mainly food, but there are also soap, cleaner, eco nappies, handcrafts. Besides the direct market, the network promotes agro-tourism in the producers' sites, urban agriculture activities and campaigns.¹

¹ <http://www.redeecologicario.org/> - accessed in 31.03.11

Another example of collective association for political consumption based on network and direct market is the Minga Network² in France. Dubuisson-Quellier & Lamine (2008) identified that, besides facilitating the connection of producers and consumers locally, the organization fosters the consumers to get involved in the local arena of deliberation in order to discuss public policies.

Conclusions

The main concern of the critics of ethical consumption is its individualized face that, as pointed by Maniates (2001), that leaves “little room to ponder institutions, the nature and exercise of political power, or ways of collectively changing the distribution of power and influence in society—to, in other words, “think institutionally”.

This paper argues that the individualized action considered on the reviewed publications only describes one of the different existing types of political engagement through consumption. When consumers and producers engage in a direct-market scheme, they express collective and political choices that can be translated into political pressure. Such networks coordinate the individual will of making a difference with a collective and political act, empowering the actors that get away from the role of victim of the market to assume the role of citizens.

² <http://www.minga.net/spip.php?article123> - accessed in 01.04.11

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