

ENVIRONMENT, POLITICS AND DEVELOPMENT WORKING PAPER SERIES

DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY, KING'S COLLEGE LONDON

Year 2008

Paper 4

**SPACES OF INTENTION AS EXCLUSIONARY PRACTICE:
EXPLORING ETHICAL LIMITS TO 'ALTERNATIVE'
SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION**

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Abstract

The rise of sustainable consumption as a privileged form of market-driven political action is now widely recognised. Through the promotion of fair trade, organic production and similar movements, an 'alternative' politics of consumption has become widespread in the North and now increasingly so in the South too. In the process, relatively affluent consumers and (often) poor producers are assumed to have united, through bonds that are forged based on notions of fairness, ecological sustainability and product quality. Yet these 'spaces of intention' are premised on the creation of borders that exclude people and knowledge even as they seek to define new communities of the seemingly 'like-minded'. This paper assesses these exclusionary practices using selective examples from the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Mexico and Malaysia in order to highlight some of the possible ethical ambiguities and limits to sustainable consumption. In doing so, we hope to contribute to a growing critical literature on the meaning and utility of alternative market-driven solutions to contemporary social and environment problems.

Keywords: sustainable consumption, alternative, ethics, spaces of intention, borders, exclusionary practices

Introduction

Sustainable consumption is gaining favour in both the North and the South as consumers increasingly ‘vote’ with their shopping trolleys. For example, the fusing of citizenship, politics and consumption had helped generate a UK market for ‘ethical goods’ worth nearly £2 billion in 2006 (Clarke *et al.*, 2007; Seyfang, 2005). Debate has been sparked here. For some (such as Clarke *et al.*, 2007), this is ‘encouraging’: consumers are ‘political’ without having to think too deeply about their impacts on people or planet. Yet consumers of commodities like fair trade coffee or organic tomatoes are located in situations distinguished by their enviable ability to ‘govern’ themselves (Barnett *et al.*, 2005). ‘Care-full’ shopping choices are thus made, albeit only thanks to the toil of producers. Consuming these goods—so the argument goes—not only allows the purchaser to engage with specific movements associated with these goods, but (when atomised buying is aggregated) the magic of a broader consumer politics is also realised through market-mediated change.¹ Others disagree pointing out that the politics of choice are not only historically and geographically contingent, but also unequal and unpredictably voluntary (e.g. Bryant and Goodman, 2004).

Indeed, there is need for a critical approach to sustainable consumption, especially insofar as it is upheld as an ethical alternative to the status quo. Through fair trade, organic shopping and similar movements, our times are marked by an ‘alternative’ politics of consumption – in both North and South – that demands attention. Here, some relatively affluent consumers are ‘united’ with (usually) relatively poor producers through bonds forged on the basis of fairness, ecological sustainability and product quality.² Our concern is to explore these morally inflected connections of consumption and production – hereafter called ‘*spaces of intention*’. Building on recent work in geography on the ‘moral turn’ (e.g. Barnett and Land, 2007; Massey, 2004; Lawson, 2007; Popke, 2006), consumption (Cook *et al.*, 2006, 2007; Goodman *et al.*, forthcoming; Goss, 2004, 2006; Mansvelt, 2008), and ‘alternative’ commodity spaces (Hughes, 2005, 2005; McCarthy, 2006a, b, 2008; see also Gibson-Graham, 2006), our interest is to understand what these spaces may mean and how they operate in an unequal world. This is a large subject and we must be selective. However, a key aspect is that these spaces assume a drawing of borders that exclude people and knowledge even as they define new communities of the ‘like-minded’. Yet exclusionary practices may lead to paradox inasmuch as ‘communities’ are based on unclear intentions. This paper assesses selected exclusionary practices – with reference to examples from the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Mexico and Malaysia – to highlight some ethical ambiguities and limits to sustainable consumption. We hope to contribute to a critical literature that debates the meaning and utility of alternative market-driven solutions to contemporary problems – a literature that does not simply view these spaces of intention as arenas of economic, political and affective opportunity.

This paper is organised as follows. It outlines what ‘spaces of intention’ are – namely, complicated and ambiguous arenas where material and discursive connections between and among consumers and producers are made. We also explore how the drawing of borders – necessary in demarcating space – leads to exclusionary practices. The paper then considers evidence of exclusionary practice from work in the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Mexico and Malaysia.³ The conclusion assesses the overall utility and prospects for ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption that adheres to market-oriented reformist politics.

¹ See DuPuis (2000), Goodman and DuPuis (2002) and Guthman (2002) for critical pioneering work on this coming out of agro-food studies.

² Some producers are fairly affluent (e.g. some organic farmers in the North).

³ Fieldwork used qualitative methods including interviews, documentary analysis and observation. Research undertaken in the Dominican Republic was conducted by XXXX in 2003, in Quintana Roo, Mexico by XXXX

Defining spaces of intention by drawing borders

The spaces of intention that underpin the ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption sector both reflect and render distinctive the contemporary era. Insofar as they encapsulate the anxieties and desires of our time, they are as emblematic in their own way as reality TV, the mobile phone or the iPod. Thus, the sights, sounds and smells of sustainable consumption more and more surround us: shopping in the supermarket, speciality organic and other shops, farmer’s market, relaxing in the corner café and coffee-shop chain, or browsing the Web and other media such as newspapers and television. It is all grist to the mill of sustainability: a key mantra of our times that everyone seemingly wants to be a part of. Even the fair trade sector, not long ago largely the preserve of ‘anti-capitalists’ and other radicals, and still considered by some to be the pinnacle of sustainability in the alternative sector with its ‘triple bottom-line’ of economic, environmental and social sustainability, has witnessed dramatic growth. Yet some now speak of the ‘corruption’ of fair trade, as it captures the imagination of large mainstream firms and politicians (e.g. Low and Davenport, 2005, 2006). In a world in which everyone apparently believes in trading ‘fairly’, even controversial giants such as Starbucks, McDonald’s and Nestle are firmly on the fair trade bandwagon – in the name of consumer choice and corporate social responsibility.

This is putting an immense strain on the spaces of intention that are an essential part of the infrastructure of the alternative sustainable consumption sector. At a general level, these spaces may be said to involve and encompass those ‘greener’ and often ‘socially sustainable’ production and consumption places connected in time and space that are designated as ‘different’, ‘alternative’, ‘better’, or more ‘progressive’ than those practices found in the mainstream economy. The former are quite disparate with their own tensions and differences – compare the organic and fair trade sectors, for instance, and one is reminded of debates in the 1970s and 1980s over ‘red’ versus ‘green’ options (Redclift, 1984). Yet they nonetheless share a strong desire to reform the neo-liberal status quo that is seen to be a social and ecological disaster. Unlike the ‘more political’ [sic] approaches of an earlier era (e.g. socialist, anarchist), however, the capitalist market is not to be abandoned, but used to better effect as the profit motive is harnessed to progressive practices.

Spaces of intention have sprung up like mushrooms around the world crisscrossing space, place and scale. Their diversity is breathtaking. Thus, examples beyond fair trade include eco-tourist destinations such as the green sections of the Mexican Riviera (Redclift 2004), organic farms and shops in the North (Guthman, 2004; Tovey, 1997; Vos, 2000) and South (Raynolds, 2004; see also below), and even Southern landscapes (e.g. tree plantations) connected to the voluntary offset market, designed to capture the ‘luxury’ emissions of the North (Agarwal and Narain, 1991).⁴ The importance of food in the alternative sustainable consumption sector is clear (Maye *et al.*, 2007; Sage, 2003) with spaces of intention reaching along the production-consumption chain from farms to farmers’ markets (Kirwan, 2004; Hinrichs, 2000; Moore, 2006) through to ‘fair trade cities’ (Malpass *et al.*, 2007). That sector has expanded to embrace the major supermarkets (hitherto simply shrines to conventional consumption) notably through the UK ‘Ethical Trading Initiative’ (Freidberg, 2003; Hughes, 2001), and on into the spaces of the home (Hobson, 2006; Kneafsey, *et al.*, forthcoming).

Spaces of intention have even entered virtual worlds. At present, these spaces are focused on those of the virtual kind that are one step removed from ‘real world’ activities such as NGO sustainable consumption websites (Hinton, forthcoming) and environmental pledge websites such as the one run by the *The Guardian* newspaper in the UK, where people

between 2001 and 2005, and in Malaysia by XXXX in 2005. We are grateful for funding that supported this research ...

⁴ On carbon offset markets, see Bumpus and Liverman (forthcoming); also Goodman (2007).

can monitor and pledge to reduce their carbon footprint.⁵ Yet, with the dramatic rise of Second Life and other 3-D virtual worlds such as Sweden's Entropia Universe and South Korea's Cyworld, the alternative sustainable consumption sector is poised to enter the virtual world in a much bigger way (Keegan, 2007).

These sorts of rapid change are indicative both of the growing importance of spaces of intention to the heterogeneous alternative sustainable consumption sector *and* their seemingly infinite malleability – limited only perhaps by the frontiers of human imagination and desire. It is perhaps this combination of growth and flexibility that has led some scholars to accentuate the positive – for example, Barnett *et al.* (2005) and Clarke *et al.* (2007) talk about how caring across space through alternative sustainable consumption can open up new political, cultural and economic opportunities. These are indeed 'spaces of hope' because of their seemingly great potential for being inclusive – which, as more and more producers and consumers around the world join up, would appear but a truism.

The creation of borders is vital to this process. Without some sense of what (people, things, knowledge, etc) is inside rather than outside a given space, it becomes all but impossible to even speak of a specific space. Most work on borders has focused on their deployment around the 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1991) and 'containers' (Taylor, 1994) that are called the 'nation-state' (Flint and Taylor, 2007). Beyond debates over the geo-political nature and role of borders in relation to (inter) state action, work has probed how borders help to define both collective and personal identity (Newman and Paasi, 1998). Yet such identification is complex, contradictory and contingent – especially in light of processes of neo-liberalisation and globalisation that render borders simultaneously less and more important (for example, in relation to the movement of labour, see Sparke, 2006; Shuttleworth, 2007). In a world of 'overlapping' sovereignties and territorialities, the meanings that attach to borders change even as their utility as a means of delimiting and regulating 'inside' from 'outside' is debated (Walker, 1990; Storey, 2001; Flint and Taylor, 2007)

Of interest here is how the creation of bordered spaces of intention is as much about specifying what is *excluded* as what is included in the 'charmed circle' of the ostensibly like-minded. In any given time and place, *certain* opportunities are opened up for *some* people even as *selected* opportunities are closed down for *other* people. Critical analysis needs to ask: whose intentions and whose benefit?

Exclusionary practices are not necessarily bad – especially in the realm of alternative sustainable consumption. These practices seem indispensable to the effort to filter out people and ideas that are 'non-alternative'. Indeed, one of our examples below highlights precisely one such set of practices. To the extent that the creation of spaces of intention around alternative sustainable consumption involves an effort to displace existing ways of doing things, it is likely though to provoke opposition, often from the politically and economically powerful. Many in the alternative consumption sector see this as both inevitable and good – in a neo-liberal world characterised by great inequalities of wealth and opportunity, exclusion is a tool of 'resistance'.

Yet what an ambiguous tool! Three issues point to a potential dark side to this sector. First, there is the way in which individuals or groups that lead in defining spaces of intention embed their own interests and concerns at the heart of the process – interests and concerns that may not be shared by all others involved. The material and discursive construction of these spaces is never neutral as it reflects the political, economic and cultural beliefs of those who construct them. Moreover, the construction process may have *unintended* consequences that are ethically dubious. For example, the codes of conduct and labelling schemes that are

⁵ See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/treadlightly>.

an important part of the sector may provide a sense of security and sanctioned knowledge for some, even while enhancing the *insecurity* of others left marginalized under this system. As examples from the Dominican Republic and Costa Rica highlight below, the path of good intentions can be littered with unintended victims.

A second issue relates to the ways in which the malleable nature of these spaces of intention can lead to their appropriation by individuals or groups who may use them in ways not intended (or desired) by those involved in their initial construction. Here, the ambiguous quality of human intention comes to the fore. Such intention is often multifaceted. For instance, scholars note how those seen to be acting on behalf of others may be simultaneously pursuing their own self-interest – the two are not mutually exclusive (Benhabib, 1992; Allahyari, 2000; Bryant, 2005). Some rational choice thinkers seem to suggest the latter (e.g. Becker, 1981). People’s intentions can also be duplicitous – intentions are either not what they seem or declared intentions mask non-declared intentions. As the Malaysian example suggests, the ‘benefits’ of being a consumer of organic products may be quite different from those initially imagined.

A final issue is how spaces of intention fare when opponents hit back. We already alluded to the ‘dilution effect’ – whereby mainstream firms clamber on the alternative bandwagon in a process that all but drains that alternative of meaning. Other techniques may be deployed to take advantage of the fissiparous tendencies of the ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption sector. As the Mexican example illustrates, the potential to drive a wedge between Southern producers and Northern firms is one area ripe for counter-advocacy.

Our discussion so far has highlighted in an abstract manner some of the issues surrounding the creation of spaces of intention that underpin ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption. We next consider these issues in more detail by turning to specific examples where exclusionary practices take place, beginning with those linked to fair trade in the Dominican Republic and Costa Rica.

Peopling ethical consumption: fair trade networks, ironies and exclusions

Much is often made in the ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption sector of the need to render as transparent as possible processes of production and consumption typically hidden in conventional market activity. Indeed, this transparency provides the basis—informational and imaginary (cf. Goodman, 2004)—that lets consumers ‘articulate’ their ‘ethical-ness’ in the relatively comfy confines of the post-industrial North (Barnett *et al.*, 2005). Yet how do these spaces of intention—and here we refer to fair trade—operate? What is left out of these narratives and who or what is left out of the material networks that form the basis for the articulation of ethical subjects and spaces? Much work on ethical consumption (e.g. Barnett *et al.*, 2005; Clarke *et al.*, 2007; Malpass *et al.*, 2007) is only really engaged in telling one side of the story – that is, the ‘happy’ and ‘consumerist’ angle. Indeed, ethical consumption might well be

... a *political* phenomenon ... [and] one that deploys the register of ‘ethics’ and ‘responsibility’ in pursuit of some classically political objectives: collective mobilisation, lobbying, and claims-making. ... [I]n these campaigns consumption is emphatically not understood simply in terms of a ‘neoliberal’ problematic of markets, exchange and choice. Rather, it is understood in terms that link material modes of consumption to the transformation of broader systems and social relations of production, distribution and trade (Clarke *et al.*, 2007: 246; emphasis in original)

And yet, it is *exactly* the ‘problematic’ of markets, exchange and choice—i.e. the realities of doing ‘ethical’ business at multiple scales—that mould spaces of intention in ambiguous and

politicised ways, especially in relation to sites of production. Thus, we suggest the need for more detailed research in this regard—involving a more rounded *peopling* of ‘alternative’ networks—to yield insights on the ethical tensions and limits to caring at a distance (see also Barnett and Land, 2007).

Drawing on evidence from the Dominican Republic and Costa Rica, then, two factors help us to develop a more complex understanding of the spaces of intention that envelope fair trade and ethical consumption networks. The first relates to the ‘ironies’ involved in social knowledge among actors in those networks. Thus, a series of gradients haunt these spaces: while interest in the North tends to focus on how the consumer can behave more ethically (Barnett *et al.*, 2005), concern in the South (among producers, that is) is largely about gaining access to basic necessities such as clean water and sufficient food. As such, inequality of aspiration and condition is built into fair trade networks in this manner from the very beginning (Goodman, 2004).

This was painfully clear in relation to fair trade cacao networks in the Dominican Republic. Only officially recognized in 2003, the farmers of the Federación Dominicana de Productores Organicos (FEDOPO), located in the semi-denuded hillsides of Yamasa near Santo Domingo, had been selling quality organic cacao to a processing and exporting company known as YACAO since the late-1990s. Started as a non-certified ‘fair trade’ programme to market FEDOPO cacao and promote farmer welfare, YACAO is the Dominican-based arm of a Swiss chocolate company. Subsequently certified, it was dedicated at the time of research in 2003 to promoting the welfare of FEDOPO and its farmers through infrastructure development (e.g. cacao processing facilities) and financial support to the cooperative.

Yet the mechanics of developing this network served only to underscore the sharp disparity in the conditions of the producers compared with their consumer ‘brethren’ in the North – and how knowledge of that disparity was shielded from the latter. Consider ‘caring at a distance’ as manifested in strategy meetings involving YACAO’s cooperative management team (including its extension agents), the buyers, as well as the liaison between the cooperative and the Swiss chocolate company:

The idea of this particular meeting is to think about what sorts of ‘development’ projects might be needed by the farmers before, during and after the fair trade certification that FEDOPO had applied for (and is [at that time] still pending). The projects would be funded by the company until income from the fair trade premium came online. The conversation revolved around the supply of plastic sacks and gloves to clean up the waste on many farms (in preparation for the farm inspections), the building of latrines for members of the cooperative, the development of cleaner water supplies—namely through tank covers that would not be full of asbestos and would keep the rats out, as well as the digging of wells—and the possibilities of building a health center. ...Talk then turned to how to market these activities at an upcoming ‘alternative’ trade conference; it was decided they would not show the latrines (everyone laughing about the prospect of selling themselves through the tag line ‘FEDOPO and YACAO, hand in hand making latrines’), but rather kids brushing their teeth with clean water. In the end, it was decided that each month would be devoted to a particular ‘cause’, again funded by the company and any other outside funds they could access: February would be ‘health month’, March would be ‘latrine month’, April-May would be ‘nutrition months’, and June to August would be ‘clean up the farms for inspection’ months. (Fieldnotes, 2003)

The need for such rudimentary facilities and services only served to underscore, though, the sheer destitution of the producers – a ‘fact’ not adequately appreciated by the visitors. Further underscoring the inequalities at play here, it emerged at the meeting that many FEDOPO members had never tasted chocolate – the ultimate fruit of their labour.⁶

This sort of disparity is not unusual. Many basic things (e.g. toilets, clean water and even chocolate) that more affluent people take for granted are in short supply or absent in poor communities. Yet the well off should be quite aware of this disparity given the years of attention devoted to the topic of the ‘poverty stricken’ Third World. Yet in a post-Cold War era in which neo-liberalism is pre-eminent, collective (Northern) amnesia seems on the rise. Hence the modern ‘anaemic’ conditions (Guthman, 2007a) in which Northerners now seem to find themselves where the required response is almost *exclusively* about shopping and consumption politics via the idiom of ‘fair trade’ and the like (e.g. eco-tourism).

What is new, then, are the unexplored ironies that these networks stitch together. Seemingly lost in ‘doing politics in an ethical register’ (Clarke *et al.*, 2007) is any wider discussion in these ‘alternative’ networks about – to take the Dominican example – the uncomfortable fact that, while one end of the chain is often simply concerned with getting clean water and latrines, the other end is largely set on behaving in an ‘ethically responsible’ way. Consideration of ‘entitlements’ (Sen, 1981) and ‘capabilities’ (Watts, 2000) drawn from development literature is thus absent.

The second factor that renders our understanding of spaces of intention more complex is the exclusionary practices of knowledge and taste that underpin them yet which sit uncomfortably with lofty network aims. Take product ‘quality’ – an issue that has long been an overriding concern in the ‘alternative’ market. This is certainly clear in fair trade (Bacon, 2005; Nichols and Opal, 2005; Renard, 2003, 2005)—dogged as it is by a reputation for goods that taste horrible, look poor and appear unfashionably ‘hippie’. As with sustainability standards in general (Guthman, 2004, 2007b), the exigencies of ‘good taste’ have livelihood consequences even for producers in ‘socially just’ (Raynolds *et al.*, 2007) markets. Thus, the creation of spaces of intention is party to processes of neo-liberal disciplining and associated exclusion—according to quality and taste—that reflect a reliance on market-based approaches. As such, these spaces are *bounded* entities – not open-ended meeting points for ‘action-at-a-distance’ (Barnett *et al.*, 2005, 29). The example of fair trade and organic cacao networks in Costa Rica considered next underscores further the ethical ambiguities and limits to spaces of intention as aspirations about product quality entail that some marginal producers end up excluded.

Indeed, in a cruel irony, demand for top quality in fair trade and other ‘alternative’ networks has had the unintended effect of sometimes leaving the poorest and most marginal producers on the outside of these networks (Moberg, 2005; Renard, 2005). This is a variation on the ‘barriers to entry’ theme that Guthman (2004, 2007b) in particular has noted in work on organic foods, farming and labelling.

This quality ‘problem’ is neatly exemplified in what happened during a recruiting mission run by the Asociación de Pequeños Productores de Talamanca (APPTA) in the Talamanca region of Costa Rica in 1998. This cooperative sought to build up its exports of organic bananas and cacao by inducting new members. With this aim in mind, the mission interviewed candidates in the mountains near San Clemente above the lowland banana plantations run by Chiquita.

After one or two successful stops at some individual farms (where new members were enrolled), we came to the settlement of one particular family which was studded with

⁶ The company head later brought chocolate bars made from YACAO cacao to distribute to members.

sweeping views of the Caribbean, two sets of cacao-drying racks, a small amount of land and the basic wooden-slatted buildings in which they lived. After the usual greetings, [one of the members of APPTA] shoved his hand into a bag of cacao that had come from the surrounding farm, while the other went off with the farmer to have a look at his production facilities. As the farmer left, [the APPTA member who stayed behind] turned to me [XXX] with a rather bleak look and, after popping a bit of dried cacao into his mouth for a quick taste, shook his head. Curious, I asked him what the matter was; his reply was simple: ‘Poor quality and taste’. The implication was that this very poor farmer would continue to be left to his own devices until the quality of his cacao improved, at which time there might be room for him in the cooperative. Interestingly, the next and final farmer visited by the recruiting mission that day—up the mountain trail a bit further—received more of a favourable reaction for both his cacao and bananas and so would become a member of the cooperative then and there. (Fieldnotes, 1998)

In short, the ‘natural capital’ (soil quality, drainage, etc) that largely determines the ‘quality’ of goods in alternative networks such as this one in Costa Rica is unequally distributed among poor farmers who are themselves socially and economically differentiated. Such inequality then helps to determine, in turn, the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion that define spaces of intention. There is a symmetry involved here: just as inequalities of wealth help determine who consumes ‘alternative’ commodities, so too inequalities of wealth help decide who will produce goods of sufficient ‘quality’ to enter alternative networks.

Such exclusionary practices are the norm. Thus, the head of a key fair trade certification agency in the North remarked that, ‘this was indeed the way things worked’ in a market-based approach (Anonymous, 2003). Indeed, in recognition of the importance of ‘quality’ goods to the mainstreaming of fair trade, the Fairtrade Labelling Organisations International (FLO)—international housekeeper of fair trade standards and certification located in Bonn, Germany— has belatedly introduced a programme designed to boost production quality in marginal cooperatives.

There is, too, the question of the uneven playing field that producer cooperatives encounter as they struggle to make their mark in fair trade. Thus, the cooperatives involved in this market (particularly those in the coffee and chocolate industries) are not created equal. Many of the most successful cooperatives such as CONACADO in the Dominican Republic and Kuapa Kokoo in Ghana⁷—both leaders in organic cacao production and export—have had substantial organizational support through early NGO involvement from GTZ and Twin Trading respectively. This is neither to detract from their success nor their immense efforts to make themselves commercially viable. It is also not to deny the invaluable support that these organisations provide to the livelihoods and welfare of members.

Rather, this is to recognize four characteristics of the yet further *bounded* nature of fair trade that amount to a powerful set of exclusionary practices: (1) the fundamental importance of early technical and economic support from international NGOs that assists producer cooperatives to enter the market, often at the expense of other unassisted cooperatives; (2) the competitive state of the market means that new cooperatives find themselves at a strong disadvantage as late entrants to a field in which better established cooperatives dominate; (3) a de facto barrier to entry that requires each cooperative to pay a \$3500 fee to FLO before it can be registered as a fair trade supplier – a fee that falls hardest on the poorest cooperatives; and (4) the fact that cooperatives must show evidence of a buyer

⁷ FEDOPO benefited too from early relations with YACAO and APPTA – providing it with international expertise and support as well as networks.

for their products before they can be put on FLO's list of cooperatives – another administrative measure that sifts out the least well connected and/or business savvy. Thus, fierce competition as well as new pricing structures and access requirements erect entry barriers to these spaces of intention that cast doubt on the perception of these spaces as an unmitigated ethical 'good'.

Evidence drawn from the Dominican Republic and Costa Rica, thus suggests a strong need *not* to take the claims —or indeed theorisations—made in the 'alternative' sustainable consumption sector at face value. Our point is not to dismiss either the material importance or ethical significance of this sector. Rather, it is to argue that critical analysis must explore the *actual* practices associated with these spaces of intention. Indeed, at a time when the harsh fluorescence of the capitalist market illuminates and seemingly moulds behaviour around the world to an unparalleled degree, such analysis is essential. Clearly, the possibilities of an ethics of care through consumption at-a-distance might be tempered by the bounded-ness evident in not only the standards and certification regimes that govern these products, but also in the penchant of neo-liberal influenced policies to use the 'invisible hand' of the market against the most vulnerable. This is not trivial: Gibson-Graham's (2006) 'diverse' or 'proliferative economies'—of which fair trade and organic production might be central in Southern contexts—work for some poor individuals and groups *but not for others*. This is no accident since there are particular historical and economic reasons for inclusion and exclusion, which may or may not (be seen to) be 'fair'. The 'spaces of hope' (Lawson, 2005, 2007) opened up by novel ethical/sustainable geographies of care need to meet the tastes and preferences of those 'gatekeepers' who mediate entry into new consumer markets for these spaces even to operate at all.

Excluding the powerful in Mexico⁸

That spaces of intention are seen to represent new ways of doing things based on market-based 'alternative' practices is clear. Yet, as noted, work on sustainable consumption has begun to underscore the pitfalls of this approach to reforming global capitalism. One problem relates to the ambiguities and contradictions that occur as an effort is made to embed new spaces of intention in producing regions where the desperately poor are numerous, and existing ways of doing things based on powerful and highly inequitable local political economies are entrenched. Here, we take the example of a traditional product for which there appears to be an emerging global market – *chicle* or 'natural' chewing gum – and explore how efforts to link it to new production and trading arrangements on behalf of poor producers living in the high forests of the Yucatan peninsular in Mexico met with resistance from those who would be thereby excluded from this sector.

The creation of a space of intention around 'natural' chewing gum reflected a complex history ripe with political, economic and cultural meaning. Thus, the mass production of chewing gum was, until the 1950s, dominated by *chicle*, a latex-like substance extracted from the resin of the *Chicozapote* tree, found mainly in the tropical forests of Mexico and Guatemala (Redclift, 2004; Redclift and Forero, 2006). Thereafter, chewing gum was produced synthetically – largely from hydrocarbons, derived from a form of vinyl. Its history as a 'natural' forest product appeared then to be over even as the ranks of forest producers began to dissipate. However, natural *chicle* is making a comeback. Indeed, it is attractive to Northern consumers wishing to combine a taste for gum with ethical support for fair trade and organic products.

Natural, *chicle*-based gum is thus now available on the Web, where the customer is told (in the case of the company Glee Gum) that it is "all natural chewing gum made from

⁸ The research on which this section is based owes a great deal to

sustainably harvested rainforest chicle”. Such gum also comes with Coop America’s Business Seal of Approval, which “helps consumers identify and support socially responsible companies that have been screened and approved by Co-op America”. This seal of approval is designed to show customers that there is a firm commitment on the part of businesses, such as Glee Gum, to uphold the highest production standards.⁹ The benefits of such commendation include listing in Co-op America’s Green Business Pages, “the national honor roll of socially responsible companies”. Companies are screened to establish their green credentials following which, if they are approved, they can advertise using the Co-op America logo.

A similar product, ‘Jungle Gum’, is advertised on the Raintree website’s On Line Store whose products, it is there claimed, are “extensively documented, thoroughly researched and unconditionally guaranteed” (<http://www.rain-tree.com/rtmprod.htm>). The consumer is invited into a veritable Aladdin’s cave of ethical, sustainably sourced products, all of which come from tropical rainforest (Fedick, 2003). Material is presented on both sites about the history of the *chicleros* (or *chicle* tappers), who built empires for corporations such as Wrigley’s and Thomas Adams in the early twentieth century – firms that grew fantastically wealthy by establishing chewing gum as an iconic, global product (Redclift, 2004). However, the recent development of commercial chicle has a darker history than that presented on such websites, oriented as they are to sales to Northern consumers. This history supports our wider analysis of the ethical ambiguities and limits of ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption – and its (at times) quite tenuous links to a spatial politics of hope for producers.

The commercialisation of Mexican *chicle* became a key function of diverse federations of *chicle* cooperatives, the first of which was founded in Quintana Roo in 1937. These federations were strict hierarchies linked closely to the Mexican State; indeed, no sale could be made without authorisation from the Federation president. It was not until 1978 that the presidents of chicle cooperatives and federations were elected democratically. However, even this step did not end state intervention. Thus, the entire national production of *chicle* was sold through one export company – the *Impulsadora y Exportadora Nacional* (IMPEXNAL) – a branch of the *Banco Nacional de Comercio Exterior* (National Foreign Trade Bank). This monopoly was created through a government law, which exempted IMPEXNAL from paying export taxes. For the producers it was thus impossible to influence the prices that they were paid. As such, most revenue (and profit) was retained by IMPEXNAL.

The declining importance of *chicle* in the latter half of the twentieth century (when synthetic gums were dominant) led the Federal Government to lose interest in this sector providing thereby an opening for producers to seek a better deal for themselves. A case in point is the Union of Chicle Cooperatives that has sought to deal directly with manufacturers of chewing gum. Yet this goal has been difficult to attain as powerful interests fight exclusion from ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption networks.

Thus, former managers of IMPEXNAL directed foreign buyers to a new company, Mexitrade, set up in the wake of the unravelling of IMPEXNAL. This new firm was also closely linked to the State. Not surprisingly, buyers were initially reluctant to buy from the Union, especially as former IMPEXNAL managers had strongly advised them to buy from Mexitrade. Such state-linked economic practice is common in Mexico (Banister, 2007)

The Union initially then had no choice but to sell to Mexitrade and accept their prices. Thus, although production of chicle varied markedly above and below an average of 395 tonnes per annum in the mid 1990s, the price that the Union received from Mexitrade changed little. Indeed, between 1999 and 2002, the price remained the same at US\$4, 46 a

⁹ See <http://www.coopamerica.org/cabn/about/sealofapproval.cfm>

kilo irrespective of international demand during that period. Frustrated by this situation, the Union of Chicle Cooperatives looked to bypass Mexitrade. There was some success here in 1998 when the Union completed direct negotiations with Wild Things (an organic chewing gum manufacturer from the US), as well as with Mitsuba (an intermediary that sells *chicle* on to Japanese manufacturers). Mexitrade's control over *chicle* began to slip.

However, powerful state-linked interests behind Mexitrade did not take kindly to this effort to thereby exclude them. The fight-back began almost immediately. This involved a campaign against the Union based on 'counter-exclusionary' practice: an enhanced bureaucratic burden for producers working through the Union and strong financial incentives for individuals who defected from the Union scheme through illegal smuggling of *chicle*.

Opponents of the Union took advantage of the thick layers of bureaucratic 'red tape' that were still involved in any effort to export goods – and, above all, their strong connections to those in government who controlled this process – to stymie Union deals. Indeed, there are an array of regulations and export licenses that have to be dealt with before legal shipping of *chicle* can proceed. These include: an authorisation of forest exploitation, a shipment authorisation from the Federal Government, State Government authorisation, authorisation to transport dried resin to storage houses, and even Federal Government requirements concerning 're-shipment' of merchandise previously stored. In addition, there must be a report of transaction each time any part of a previously authorised quantity of chewing gum is shipped (all *chicle* is not usually transported at once).

To complicate things further, these procedures cannot be tackled directly by the Union or individual cooperatives. Instead, they are undertaken indirectly through the *comisario ejidal* (administrative authority of communal lands) that manages land on behalf of local communities. This arrangement reflects legislation on forest management that specifies that all *chicleros* in cooperatives must also be members of an *ejido*.¹⁰ The *chicozapote* trees, from which *chicle* is tapped, are mainly located in *ejidal* forests, which are communally owned and managed by this *ejidal* authority. In keeping with these regulations, therefore, forest inspectors must go to the *ejido* to verify information contained in a report each time that a document is handed in to this authority.

These bureaucratic procedures are difficult to meet at the best of times. However, when powerful groups linked to Mexitrade worked behind the scenes to drag out the process even further, then the capacity of the Union to make contracts and export *chicle* was diminished. During 2002-2003, for example, the Union could not meet new export orders received in relation to the Korean market. When Union managers explained the convoluted procedures that they had to follow in order to win official approval for exports to their Korean counterparts, the latter thought it impossible that a government could act so plainly against the interests of its own exporters and hence accused the Union of commercial misconduct. The matter was eventually resolved. Yet this experience forced the Union to change marketing strategy. Given the administrative measures that it needed to fulfil, Union managers calculated that they could not accept orders for *chicle* beyond 900 tonnes a year – even though they could produce 2,000 tonnes per year.

High transaction costs associated with these measures only exacerbated Union woes. These costs include funds for a technical study of forest resources, stamp duty, fees for forest exploitation and the transport permit fee. Then there are the regular operational costs of the cooperatives which include contributions to member retirement funds as well as to the hospitalisation and sickness fund through which *chicleros* access health services. Such costs

¹⁰ The *ejido* is the community land unit which provides usufruct rights (not title) to farmers. It was an outcome of the 1910 Revolution, but the *ejido* has been undermined, especially since 1992, as land and natural resources are effectively privatised.

are yet another burden that enhances the cost of Union *chicle* – leaving them vulnerable in turn to attack.

The counter-exclusionary campaign has thus encompassed illegal smuggling of *chicle* (known as *coyotaje*) in a move designed to undermine the Union's legal export programme. This is a grave matter. Indeed, Union representatives (former *chicleros*) who liaise with the rank and file identify *coyotaje* as the biggest single threat to the Union. At the heart of this process are *coyotes* – individuals who tempt *chicleros* with a price superior to that offered by cooperatives. *Coyotes* can do so as they do not pay the routine costs that cooperatives incur and also smuggle *chicle* to Chetumal, on the border with Belize.

The smugglers found a ready ally in the disgruntled groups linked to Mexitrade. The latter would buy *chicle* from *coyotes* in Chetumal through intermediaries such as PFSCA (Forest Products of Southeast Mexico and Central America). PFSCA is mainly dedicated to the commercialisation of hardwoods, but dabbles too with Non Traditional Forest Products. This move reflected worsening relations between Mexitrade and the Union, especially after a fraught 1998-1999 season. Following the Asian crisis of the late 1990s, the purchase of natural gum from there dried up – a major blow since Asia was the largest market for Mexican *chicle*. Mexitrade, which had just bought *chicle* from the Union, but then found could not sell it in Asia, refused to pay for that order. The Union took Mexitrade to court over the matter and in response the latter refused to buy from the former, opting to work with PFSCA instead. Both *coyotes* and Mexitrade benefited from this illegal trade even as the original exclusionary practices of the Union backfired.

Yet the Union too has fought back. Thus, it slowly re-built its export links. It courted former business partners seeking to respond to their shifting requirements while working to improve delivery reliability. It also addressed the demand of firms (especially in Japan) for better 'quality' via new processing techniques. Contracts followed with firms in Japan, Indonesia, Korea, and Italy. Meanwhile, efforts by the Union and affiliated cooperatives to woo back individual producers from the smugglers are paying off. Indeed, no *chicleros* have been forced to sell to *coyotes* recently (even if the threat of smuggling persists).

The effort by the Union of Chicle Cooperatives and its allies to control the production and export of *chicle* is small scale. Yet this effort is revealing in that it illustrates once again the important if complex role of boundaries in creating spaces of intention for 'alternative' sustainable consumption. In this case, the exclusion of powerful groups linked to the production and export business in Mexico achieved mixed results, in part due to the 'counter-exclusionary' measures pursued by those excluded by the Union. While it seems that the Union has been able to out compete its opponents, at least for now, this situation could well change in the future as market conditions change and/or local opponents devise new ways to tap into the hopeful spaces that the Union seeks to embed in Mexico's traditionally unequal political economy. Exclusion, as with much else in these spaces of intention, is always a contingent phenomenon.

Excluding the 'common' consumer in Malaysia

The creation of spaces of intention in which like-minded producers and consumers come together in the context of sustainable consumption suggests a unity of purpose that may not exist in practice. While producers are in the business of maximising livelihoods, the role of consumers is far from clear – especially as alternative consumption practices appear in non-Northern countries. Critical work documents the sometimes ambiguous personal reasoning that informs the consumption choices of individuals in the North (e.g. Seyfang, 2005; Moore, 2006). We pursue this critique further here by considering the possible relationship between the erection of barriers around spaces of intention and the slippery nature of middle class

consumer intention. We do so with a Malaysian example – a prospering Southern country where alternative consumption is only now beginning to make its mark.

In rapidly developing Malaysia (as in a number of other countries in the South), a prospering middle class is beginning to translate *inter-linked* concerns about environmental degradation, healthy living and general social well-being into a set of ‘alternative’ practices linked to sustainable consumption (Hobson, 2004). An entire industry is gearing up to cater to these concerns drawing a new group of consumers into the ‘alternative’ fold. Yet it is not clear that the intentions of this group are a mirror image of ‘liberal’ intentions (however complex and ambiguous) often espoused in North America. The social and environmental circumstances under which Southern consumers (as in Malaysia) resort to sustainable consumption usually differ from conditions that existed when such consumption was pioneered in the North.

The rise of ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption in Malaysia as a middle-class phenomenon is recent and still limited when compared (for instance) with neighbouring Singapore (cf. Hobson, 2004).¹¹ Most of that growth has occurred since 2000. Typically, it is a practice that is most noticeable in urban areas, especially in the two biggest cities – Kuala Lumpur and George Town – located on the more developed and populous west coast of peninsular Malaysia. In George Town (a city of 400,000 inhabitants located on Penang Island), there were thus some half dozen small organic shops in operation in 2005 with most of them having opened their doors only in the previous two or three years. These were pioneering outfits – local supermarkets had yet to tap into the organic trend as has happened in the more ‘mature’ markets of the North. Further, the décor and products were entirely pitched towards a middle-class clientele in one of Asia’s ‘most liveable’ cities.

In the case of the Green Organics Mart, for example, the focus was on organic consumption as a source of healthy living with an array of expensive foodstuffs (e.g. coffee, tea, bread, juice, fresh fruit and vegetables) and health care products (including supplements) on offer. Products were sourced mainly from Kuala Lumpur with many originating in the USA and Australia. There was, too, an assortment of reading materials on ‘personal well-being’ to hand for the discerning customer. Its location in a North American-style shopping complex in a relatively affluent area completed this picture of a middle class refuge.

Organic shops such as Green Organics Mart form part of a wider pattern of middle-class concern emerging over wasteful and unhealthy consumption. Thus, to take another key activity in the sustainable consumption sector, recycling centres supported by local government and residents’ associations have become more common in Malaysia since the turn of the millennium. Here, again, middle-class consumers are at the forefront, as people become more environmentally aware (for one survey, see Haron *et al.*, 2005). Thus, for example, office manager Teoh Hooi Lee was reported in one local newspaper as driving over to her local recycling centre (in Petaling Jaya in Selangor State) “with her 4-wheel drive [sic!!] full of recyclable materials” – as she proudly put it: “It’s been a routine for me every end of the month, bringing recyclable materials to the centre. I wash everything first, and sort everything out, although they don’t ask us to” (Koay, 2005: 2). Such fastidious behaviour on the part of Malaysia’s ‘new model citizenry’ stands in sharp contrast to a still all-too-widespread ‘throw away’ culture in the country. Thus, for example, when recycling bins were first introduced in George Town’s Botanical Gardens, visitors simply used them as general rubbish receptacles. To the despair of activists, this sort of practice is common, earning the city the title ‘*Pulau Pinang Darul Sampah*’ [Penang, Land of Rubbish] – a shocking indictment for a city famed for its beautiful beaches and known as the ‘Pearl’ [*Mutiara*] of

¹¹ Such consumption is not to be confused with practices linked to a ‘radical’ social movement led by Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) and Sahabat Alam Malaysia. This movement has long addressed sustainable consumption but links it to a wider anti-capitalist campaign (see www.en.cap.org.my)

Malaysia (Loh, 2005). Here, 'alternative' shopping is tantamount to a 'detox' politics that cleanses the nation's environmental behaviour through the example of personal cleansing.

Meanwhile, the Malaysian government is showing interest in 'alternative' sustainable consumption. Speaking at the 4th Malaysian Exhibition on Organic and Natural Products held in Kuala Lumpur in March 2005, one Department of Agriculture official noted that organic farming was still in its infancy in the country with but 900 hectares planted. Hence, it needed to import organic food to satisfy growing demand. To meet this demand, and to enable the country to even become a net exporter of organic food, the government set out ambitious growth targets for the sector (Ramli, 2005). Concurrently, the government is pushing the message that "ethical traders get more customers" through adverts in national newspapers that promote a new 'ethical' outlook.

These sorts of private and public practices – still small in scale but growing – bespeak a broader shift in Malaysian society that is conditioning how social identity and activism takes place. Two things stand out. First, alternative sustainable consumption there suggests the advent of a market-driven kind of 'detox' politics, that seeks to cleanse the consumer of actions that are harmful to the environment, that is *somewhat* reminiscent of countries in the North (and the USA and UK notably). There is a parallel emphasis too, now, in Malaysia on human-induced environmental crises at the local and global scales fed by extensive media coverage that seems to associate public anxiety with environmental problems, a possible complement to 'alternative' consumption everywhere. During one of the hottest summers on record in 2005, for instance, the newspapers were full of articles on global warming and related environmental catastrophes (such as the widespread haze caused by fires in nearby Indonesia) as well as the way in which Malaysia's growing ecological footprint was adding to the problem (e.g. Hari, 2005; Ooi, 2005; Sabaratnam, 2005). The message was clear: Malaysians needed to 'do something' as they had become, in the words of one fisherman, '*mahluk perosak*' [destructive creatures] who behaved "without any thought to the consequences" (cited in Sabaratnam, 2005: 3).

Yet uptake of this kind of intentional politics also fits well with Malaysian history. Thus, the country has been governed since the inter-ethnic riots (pitting Malays against Chinese) of 1969 by a Malay-led political coalition that has sought to regulate political, economic and cultural practices in order to ensure 'peaceful and harmonious' relations. Notable here is the New Economic Policy (NEP) that promoted the advancement of the more numerous, but traditionally poorer, Malays in relation to the less numerous but richer Chinese. To some extent, the NEP enabled the emergence of a sizable Malay middle class, ensuring thereby relative political stability as the country pursued its own distinctive brand of Asian capitalism (Hefner, 1998; Talib, 2001).

The country did experience once more a confrontational style of politics in the 1980s and 1990s as the environmental implications of state-sanctioned accelerated development (itself linked to the NEP) became apparent. Notably involving activists working for NGOs such as Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) and the Consumers Association of Penang (CAP), a social movement directly challenged the environmental record of the government of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (Hong, 1987; WRM and SAM, 1989). This challenge covered everything from rapid deforestation (and associated oppression of indigenous people) to polluting industrial development. The result, in a country where the political economy is predicated on accelerated development, was a severe crackdown: activists were imprisoned or gagged while surveillance of unpatriotic 'foreign-linked' NGOs intensified (Eccleston, 1996). Clearly, activism that confronted the (unsustainable) economic activities of Malaysia's political and economic elites was unwelcome (Jomo *et al.*, 2004; Doolittle, 2005; Kathirithamby-Wells, 2005). Such activism did not disappear but was more circumspect in its

challenge to official practices. Social space was thereby created for non-confrontational politics more to the liking of Malaysia's leaders as well as its affluent consumers.

An awakening interest in 'alternative' sustainable consumption also fits with the desire of Malaysia's increasingly powerful middle classes to stand out from the crowd. Here, the wish for 'distinction' (Bourdieu, 1984) is compelling. Indeed, it is perhaps even more acute in a rapidly developing society such as Malaysia than in the more economically developed North, if only because of greater proximity for many citizens (including many *nouveau riche*) to a recent poverty stricken past. We must tread carefully here – consumption can mean different things to different people and is often conditioned itself by wider religious and cultural debates (Hefner, 1998; Chua, 2001). In contemporary Malaysia, for example, a complex and multifaceted debate is under way over the role of Western consumption practices and influence in a modern Islamic state (see Wong, n.d.).

Shopping in an expensive 'alternative' organic shop (modelled on outlets in the North) seems in many respects akin to shopping in the globally connected mainstream sector (e.g. Gap, Armani). It might suggest a strong desire to imbibe globally powerful signifiers (associated with a 'healthy' and affluent lifestyle) that help, in turn, to separate out globally connected middle class consumers from their less privileged brethren. For this kind of 'alternative' consumer, even the retail setting needs to be perfectly controlled – consider, for instance, the reaction of “stay-at-home and work-at-home mum” Doris Chua, a 30-something 'event director' and Kuala Lumpur resident, to the opening of an organic shop in her area:

I am an organic food advocate and have been rather blessed to have access to many organic shops around my area. One of my favourite is JustLife which often captivate me with their freestyle graphics, creative food labels and marketing concept. Most importantly, I like to buy fresh vegetables and fruits from the shops as they are carefully selected and freshness is guaranteed.

JustLife has recently opened its flagship store in Ikano Power Centre, Kuala Lumpur with a sit down café serving organic food. There is a wider selection of fruits and vegetables in the long storage place which resembles very much like the ones you see in supermarkets [sic]. I am very impressed by their interiors and décor, which is nicely designed – kudos to the design team at JustLife. The root vegetables are placed in wooden baskets like the ones in the market ... a nice touch to getting close to nature.¹²

This passage of one devotee is interesting on several grounds. First, there is an emphasis on presentation and style as Doris is 'captivated' by the concept and layout of JustLife – thereby underlining that this shop is about much more than simply being a purveyor of fine organic food. Thus, she compliments the 'creative' and 'nicely designed' shop – a retail space packed with intentions. The 'just life' is also a 'stylish' life fit for 21st century middle-class Malaysian consumers. Second, there is a nod to a more traditional way of shopping – the wet (or farmer's) market. These markets, once ubiquitous in the country, have long been the meeting place of producers and consumers of sometimes quite different ethnic and class backgrounds. However in modern Malaysia, there is seemingly less room for such mixing in the marketplace as the prospering middle classes retreat to clean and modern supermarkets as well as to speciality upmarket organic shops. In the latter, selective admiration for a rapidly receding past nonetheless becomes a symbolic part of the décor as wooden baskets 'like the ones in the market' hold root vegetables. Doris carefully notes this 'nice touch' and goes on

¹² <http://dorischua.blogspot.com/2007/05>

to suggest it brings the shopper ‘closer to nature’ – or, more precisely, the producers who are seemingly nature’s stand-in within this narrative.

In the process, though, ‘alternative’ consumption is turned inside out: where once it might have been seen to be a marker of *political* distinction, it has seemingly now become just another marker of *social and economic* distinction for status hungry middle class consumers. Here, then, spaces of intention acquire new meaning. As sustainable consumption practices and rituals derived notably from the North are often mimicked, new borders are created that reflect and demarcate the shifting new realities of social inequality and class in Malaysia. In the process, exclusion is not an accident – it is probably partly intentional. In an ironic twist on what was noted earlier about poor marginal producers, here the espousal of environmental causes through consumption is itself a prime means by which to boost one’s standing in society.

Conclusion

This paper explored some of the ethical ambiguities and limits to the burgeoning ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption sector. Our focus was on the under-studied, yet crucial, issue of border making – something that is inevitably involved in the creation of the distinctive ‘spaces of intention’ that define this sector. Such border making is ongoing, as new aims, people and knowledge come to the fore often challenging prior ways of seeing and doing. There is much that is positive here. A politics of ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption would seem to imply a politics of border marking so that battle-lines can be clearly drawn across the market place. How else would consumers know how to make ethical choices? Yet we also saw a darker side: creating bordered spaces of intention inevitably raises the issue of *which* people and knowledge are included and excluded.

Certainly, exclusionary practices associated with the creation of spaces of intention form part of a broader politics and geography of care. Thus, and as our Mexican example illustrated, the quest by producer cooperatives to boost their role in the space of intention surrounding *chicle* involved them in crafting a new production-cum-export regime. However, this entailed a fierce battle with powerful groups thereby excluded who were primary beneficiaries of the prior regime. Indeed, they even mounted a counter-exclusionary campaign designed to frustrate this instance of hopeful border marking. This campaign is ongoing and is a sobering reminder of the ‘weapons of the strong’ that can stymie change in the ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption sector.

Exclusionary practices sometimes also end up excluding some of the poorest and most marginal producers from that sector. Here, exclusion reflects the unintended yet hardly neutral consequence of the quest for ‘quality’ by consumers. To take our example of Costa Rican cacao production, quality requires that production there take place on land with good ‘natural capital’ (e.g. organically rich well drained soils) – yet, such land is typically beyond the reach of the poorest farmers. Here, then, ‘quality’ serves as a means by which the poorest producers are excluded – just as poorer consumers at the other end of the network also tend to be weeded out as ‘quality’ products fetch premium prices beyond their ability to pay.

Indeed, as the Malaysian example revealed, the question of borders delimiting spaces of intention concerning ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption can simultaneously raise the issue of class distinction. This is especially so among the *nouveau riche* who hunger for cultural and economic markers to ‘place’ themselves in a rapidly changing world. In this sense, ‘quality’ and ‘ethically good’ behaviour come to signify not so much a politics of contestation against the status quo, as a self-conscious consumption politics that might promote the self in a ‘hip’ or ‘fashionable’ manner while being supportive of that status quo.

In this dimension of the green consumer market, in explicitly ironic overtones, identities are able to be crafted (cf. Barnett *et al.*, 2005), and a sense of ‘feel good’ and

‘creativity’ (for example in designing and provisioning ‘alternative’ retail outlets) is paramount. These consumers allow nothing to mar this experience. As such, the exclusion of ‘inconvenient’ knowledge – inconvenient in the sense of possibly rendering consumers (or ethical consumption theorists) uncomfortable – comes into play. As our example from the Dominican Republic highlighted, this might entail the exclusion of knowledge about just how poor and deprived producers in the ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption network are – for instance, in their desperate need for life’s basic necessities such as clean water and latrines. The less said about this sort of desperate poverty the better, lest it put off consumers who, after all, can probably find new ‘alternative’ outlets for their consumption politics.

We are clearly sceptical about the merits and utility of *some* aspects of the ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption sector and the market-driven politics that it reflects and reinforces. True, there are areas of hope – for instance, inasmuch as elites who have long preyed on poor producers are excluded from new spaces of intention (as is partly the case in the Mexican example). Further, some unintended exclusions – as with the poorest producers who cannot produce ‘quality’ goods – are changing over time as others in the network (such as Northern NGOs) seek to redress injustice through assistance to such individuals.

Yet all of the ethical ambiguities and limits surrounding the ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption sector cannot be eliminated so readily. Insofar as some issues reflect structural problems with the entire approach and philosophy of the sector, such tinkering (however commendable individual outcomes might be) will fail. This raises in turn a series of issues about the direction and *raison d’être* of this ‘alternative’ to the status quo.

The first issue is the precarious and contingent nature of the ability to exclude people and knowledge from the spaces of intention that surround the ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption sector. Because that sector is embedded in the wider capitalist system, there is always the strong possibility that those who are intentionally excluded (such as ‘greedy’ elites and brokers who enjoy ‘excess’ profits) will simply resort to mainstream economic channels in order to undercut that sector. Certification schemes are designed to prevent this process. Yet, much depends on the nature of the product and its transparency in the network since some products are more readily monitored than others in the journey from producer to consumer. The more complex the journey in terms of such things as product transformation and/or the number of intermediary actors involved, the more likely it may be that good intentions to help poorer producers are frustrated along the way.

There is also the problem of the voluntary nature of consumer intentions that underpin ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption (Guthman, 2007b; Watson, 2006, 2007). This sector is embedded in a wider economy that is premised on – and ‘disciplines’ consumers in the art of ephemeral consumption choices. While the ‘alternative’ sector may not seek to encourage ephemeral consumer decision-making, there is a steep gradient here, given the discursive and material power of capitalism. There are no guarantees that ‘alternative’ consumers might not switch products in search of new experiences – especially where they desire a ‘distinctive’ identity. Yet the livelihoods of producers are not ephemeral – leaving them vulnerable to the whims of consumers who may be ‘caring’ but not ‘careful’ in their choices.

Thirdly, ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption is vulnerable to subversion by elites attracted to a sector that is ‘sexy’ – a fashionable marker of status rather than a political statement of protest. Such motivation makes a mockery of the underlying ethos of the sector even as it ensures that it never fulfils its (theoretically) challenging initial premise. Yet how does one exclude elites who are ‘inauthentic’ consumers? Indeed, what does ‘authentic’ consumer mean? This is probably an impossible endeavour yet it matters precisely because, ultimately, the future of ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption is based on affinity of purpose (and not simply outcome). To see it otherwise is to reduce the sector to a ‘plaything’ of those who wish no alteration to the status quo.

Finally, the ethical ambiguity of this sector is deepened when its role as a means to sustain a status quo based on great inequalities of wealth is considered. To what extent does the 'alternative' sustainable consumption sector serve a key function today in disciplining people (in Foucault's sense; see Rutherford, 2007) to work within a system that is always likely to be based on inequality? A bit like the Keynesian welfare state of old (albeit without the more systematic redistribution of wealth and 'universal' welfare support that were hallmarks of that system), this sector persuades (some) people that capitalism is not 'bad' after all – it is worthy and capable of reform. Can an alternative politics thus ever be truly 'alternative'? Indeed, it may simply divert energy from more radical initiatives (Cumbers *et al.*, 2008).

Thus, hope residing in spaces of intention linked to 'alternative' sustainable consumption may be somewhat misplaced. If people's intentions are often ambiguous, then a politics based on the consumption choices of 'winners' in the global economy that does not simultaneously address structural inequalities that sustain the privileged position of these consumers, seems doomed from the start. As such, those desiring a hopeful politics based on 'alternative' market-based exchange need to look beyond the bottom of a (fairly traded coffee) cup or the green consumer emporium that trades on elite fashion and celebrity.

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