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Ethical Disturbances in the Force(s): Reflecting on *Globalizing Responsibility* and its Doings unto Others

Michael K Goodman

Department of Geography, King's College London

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Mike Goodman
King's College London

Ethical Disturbances in the Force(s): Reflecting on *Globalising Responsibility* and its Doings unto Others¹

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In current academic and popular accounts, ethical consumption is very often characterised as either the ultimate, flaccid 'post-political' sop for the hungry middle-classes or as a set of differentiated, righteous and satisfying new pathways to save the planet and poor people one iced, mocha latte at a time. In this problematic context, *Globalising Responsibility* should be seen as one of the first major salvos fired from the decks of a needed (and required?) geographical perspective on ethical consumption that works to cut across these unhelpful polarising debates and take us into more heady, rigorous and theoretically-innovative waters. Indeed, the authors' previous collective contributions to consumption debates are a sort of muse and compass for my own work that I continue to argue *with*, argue *for* and argue *against*, and, not surprisingly, this volume is no exception as it works to more fully theorise, conceptualise and extend their previous analysis.

And in no uncertain terms, fire numerous powerful—and often overpowering—salvos they do. Throughout the volume, almost no one or no perspective is sheltered from their razor sharp pen. The authors simply do not hold back, often letting loose with both barrels, blasting previous arguments to pieces, then picking through these remains with the deft hands of a team of surgeons applying their rhetorical scalpel to 'disturb', 'revise', 'interrupt' and 'intervene' all things consumption related. From post-structuralists, and fellow Foucauldians and governmentality scholars, to 'non-rep' theory, political economists and mainstream economic theorists all get it pretty good in one form or another. My own research on fair trade (e.g. Goodman, 2004), in just one example, comes under the hammer many a time in this book as overly consumerist, economicist, moralising, and myopic and is even mentioned in the very same sentence as *The Economist*. Yet, because of this tendency to quickly package and dismiss great swaths of nuanced material, their arguments, though powerful, clear, supple and compelling, seem sometimes just a little bit *too* compact and neat; indeed, in parts of the book whole debates are overly distilled or turned into straw-like figures that are then rhetorically blown to bits with the authors' take on ethical consumers, consumption and politics emerging heroically from the dust to stand triumphant over the littered grounds of argumentation and clumps of straw. Often, there is little willingness to build on previous studies—that is unless they fit the theoretical and empirical points on offer in the book—which works to further guarantee the wide intellectual footprint this book attempts to construct.

But let's leave my bruised ego and rather minor quibble about the nature of argumentation in the volume aside and explore what it has to offer in terms of substance. At its most grand, the book is an attempt to—in their words—'disturb' but more fully 'decolonise' our existing theorisations of the figure of the consumer and the individualisation of consumption. They use the lens of ethical consumption to suggest that by its very nature consumption as a practice and consumers as people are thoroughly socialised, tied into social, material and, in the case of ethical consumption, political and politicised networks. The key actants and actions for them in these ethical consumption networks are—instead of the stilted figure of the consumer and the overly-economistically-conceptualised act of consumption—the activist organisations working to 'cultivate' ethical consumers through their efforts to build on what the authors refer to as 'everyday', 'ordinary' and 'lay' ethics and practices of people in the form of shopping, recycling, attending church, feeding their kids and so on. As we emerge into the sunlight at the end of this theoretical

¹ Many thanks to Colin Sage, David Goodman, Jo Littler, Alex Loftus, Andrew Brooks and Max Boykoff for reading earlier and much longer and rougher versions of this commentary.

and empirical tunnelling, then, the authors' critical interventions in this book provide us with theorised understandings of (1) the 'practices' of ethical consumption, its wider networks, rationalities and politics; (2) how it is co-constructed by us as individual people with practical needs and desires and as members of wider social groups and structures; and finally (3) how ethical consumption is co-constructed by the organisations working to get us to problematise consumption across its ethical and practical a/effects.

Another key intervention the authors make here is by showing that ethical consumption is part of a multiplicity of repertoires people have in 'being political'. For them, ethical consumption is not parasitical upon, as others, including myself and Raymond Bryant, have suggested, the more 'formalised' political process of organising, protesting or voting. Ethical consumption is not a zero or negative sum game nor a politics of distraction, but rather one of a positive sum whereby ethical consumption purchases feed into more formalised political processes through the lobbying efforts of activists and NGOs who are able to 'speak' for and through 'consumption singularities' of individual purchases for, say, fair trade. Thus, the everyday and ordinary activities of choice and shopping translate into political action, and indeed 'citizenly action', in the spaces and practices coded, provided and co-created by ethical consumption networks. What this intervention does is usefully open up the meanings and practices of the political and politics as well as citizenship and civic practices in lateral ways that have the potential to inform current theorisations of the 'post-political'. Yet while the authors want us to better conceptualise how consumption, and ethical consumption in particular, is part of a much larger landscape about how people and activists actualise politics today, there is unfortunately little here on the ways that the practices of ethical consumption are considered citizenly actions by those doing these practices or the 'real world' material outcomes of politicised ethical consumption. Sure the Fairtrade Foundation sits on government policy boards and has a lot of say in the public arena, the latter much more about selling fair trade products rather than shifting trade rules anymore, but are they listened to and have they changed trade policy in any meaningful way? Yes, the Soil Association has inroads to policy makers and supermarkets, but to what ends? To say that ethical consumption singularities have political purchase and develop and create political space is one thing, but to show how and in what ways and, importantly to what effects, is another.

Finally, Barnett et al's deployment of the Foucauldian technique of 'ethical problematisation' is not only particularly useful here but also contains the potential to help us understand a range of socio-environmental issues. For them, this framing points out the ways that consumption is problematised but also how consumption and consumerism can be used by activists and 'ordinary' people as a practice that can fight global poverty, hunger and environmental destruction. Yet, this framing could also be utilised much more broadly I think, to ask parallel questions about what might be called the 'ethics' of ethical problematisation. What and in what ways does something become a problem? How and in what ways is this problem and its solution framed? And, in reference to some of my more recent work (e.g. Boykoff and Goodman, 2009; Boykoff et al, 2009), what is the contribution of various forms of media to these framings, problematisations and solutions? In a way, this begs the question about what the politics of ethical problematisation are and might be in particular contexts, all of which usefully ties to a raft of recent work on framing, media and social/cultural frames and the technologies, techniques and rules—what Barnett et al call 'grammars'—involved in all of this framing and problematisation (Boykoff, 2011; Goodman, 2013; O'Neill et al, 2013).

Yet, for me, all this disturbing of things 'consumer' and 'consumption'—even extending, arguably, to the point of the disappearance of the stable and known figure of the 'consumer'—paradoxically goes too far and, yet also not far enough. The former point can be better set upon as a question: if, as Barnett et al are asking us to do in the book, we are supposed to do this disturbing of the figure of the consumer, the act of consumption and the practices of the everyday beyond the bounds of their former recognition, then what? This book throws down a serious intellectual gauntlet that asks us as social scientists to begin the even harder work of trying to encapsulate the

complexity and 'disturbances' they point to when trying to conceptualise the figure formerly known as the consumer, the act formerly known as consumption and those practices formerly known as the everyday.

On the latter point, their disturbances of consumption and, more specifically, ethical consumption through its re-socialisation and re-embedding in practices could have been taken further and are slightly off the mark. Four points and several accompanying questions stand out here, all of which point to the need for further critical reflection, analysis and empirical research.

First, the majority of ethical consumption goods are, in the UK where they did their empirical research, sold through supermarkets. Sainsbury's is the largest seller of fair trade products in the world, with sales of £276 million in 2010 and with expectations of reaching £500 million by 2015 (*The Independent* 2011) in a reported total UK market of £1.32 billion in 2011 (Lawrence, 2012). Seventy percent of the total market for organic foods in the UK was held by supermarkets in 2011, with Tesco and Sainsbury's alone making up 50 percent of this market (Soil Association, 2012). As such, the (re)socialising and (re)embedding practices of ethical consumption lead directly to and from the supermarket aisle and check-out counter in ways that require further questions be posed about the ways that ethical consumption politics are practiced in light of the power of supermarkets. This is particularly the case, given the growing evidence that ethical consumption product lines are currently being 'squeezed out' by supermarkets in the spaces of the current recession for more budget lines of goods (Goodman et al, 2012).

Secondly, while the desire to de-centre shopping as the main vector and/or practice of consumption is part of its 'disturbing' treatment, given the above point about the centrality of supermarket shopping in acquiring ethical consumption goods in the spaces of the everyday, this tends to come off in the book as a kind of de-centring for its own sake. Indeed, as Harriet Lamb, the former executive director of the Fairtrade Foundation argues, shopping is at the veritable centre of the 'everyday' of fair trade: "What works so well is that, although we are putting a spotlight on the negative, there is a positive solution to hand which everybody can be a part of. You don't have to wait for Government to move; you don't even have to wait for companies, because you can push them into acting by buying these products. So you've got all these NGOs, the church groups, and the community-based organisations, but the really fantastic thing about Fairtrade is that you can then go shopping!" (*The Independent*, 2009). Thus, if the practice of shopping is so ideologically and practically central to the practices of ethical consumption here, why do we need to de-centre it rather than engage with its crucial role in the globalisations of responsibility in specific and important ways?

Third, I was not all that satisfied with the fact that the description of the globalising of responsibilities through the political rationalities of ethical consumption seemingly stopped at the city limits of Bristol. Surely an absolutely crucial if not fundamental part of the story of ethical consumption has to be about the everyday and ordinary ethics and practices that go into *bringing* ethical consumption goods to the consumption places from which they are able to be embodied with political rationalities. This is particularly true in the case of fair trade networks which is the lens through which Barnett et al refract their arguments: if anything, research (e.g. Bacon, 2010; Dolan, 2010; Goodman et al, 2012; Lyon and Moberg, 2010; Neilson and Pritchard, 2010; Wilson, 2010; Wilson and Curnow, 2013) has brought to light the contradictions, ambivalences and frictions within fair trade's provisioning and movement networks by the rather harsh and uncompromising *market* rationalities of 'quality' and 'quantity' that are not only acting to marginalise the poorest and least able producers, but might be seen to blunt or at least question the more ringing endorsements of both fair trade and ethical consumption the authors articulate. So while we are told that "... ethical consumption is indicative of strategies that seek to provoke new forms of global feeling which are helping to reinvent political participation and civic activism" (200), it is doing so in ways that not only ask us to specify the spatial and material processes through which responsibility is being globalised but also do so in a way that must ensure that the political economies and power dynamics of ethical consumption are as equally 'ethically problematised'.

Fourth, the propensity of the authors to call upon 'lay normativities' and 'everyday and ordinary ethics and practices' as shaping, creating, directing and resulting from ethical consumption has led me to a series of questions I think worth asking. For example, for whom, how, where and in what ways are these ethics and practices 'lay', 'everyday' and 'ordinary'? There is a tendency in the book to treat these as if they just 'exist' at all times, spaces and places and so are simply a 'given'. Surely, lay, the everyday and ordinary should be problematised in the same way as consumption, the consumer and ethical consumption in order to understand how and in what ways and by whom these tap into and create the everyday and ordinary? Indeed, there is a worrying trend here and elsewhere (e.g. Seyfang, 2006) of connecting ethical consumption to novel forms of citizenship and politics that seems not to question the *ability* to consume ethically and how this, in turn, has the potential to replicate the exclusivities of past forms of citizenship and political participation based on economic and social class. If anything, Bourdieu's point was that the ordinary and everyday consumption habits—and their accompanying ethics and practices—must be socially, culturally and economically contextualised if we are to make sense of them, ethical or otherwise. A follow up question here might then be the following: how and why has consumption and/or shopping, *in the first instance*, become *so normalised* as to be so much a part of the everyday and ordinary to be *the* practices that activists are able to call upon to deal with and mete out global justice through fair trade? Perhaps this too is worth 'disturbing' from a number of empirical, theoretical and moral angles, the move of which would no doubt fly in the face of Barnett et al's stated prescription for less moralisation about consumption.

In essence, I share a hope in the possibilities of ethical consumption presented to us in *Globalising Responsibility* and its powerful tale of how and in what ways we should and can understand the political rationalities of ethical consumption and its bid to globalise responsibility. I do reserve the right, however, to remain sceptical—and indeed moralistic—about the ability of markets and, by proxy, re-embedded and re-socialised or not, ethical consumption to shift the absolute mountains that need to be shifted in order to address sustainability, equality, rights and justice across both the UK and the rest of the globe.

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