



The accidental enterprise: Ethical consumption as commerce



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ABSTRACT

Ethical consumption is routinely promoted as a form of individualised responsibility taking whereby citizen-consumers consciously engage in morally/politically directed purchasing decisions. This has been heavily critiqued as a neoliberal reduction of civic engagement to market choice. It has also been contested by way of a shift to problematizing the consumer as moral agent; where attention is drawn instead to networks of agential entities - advocacy organisations, certifying bodies, marketing discourses, retail spaces, packages, household routines, and so on - that configure consumption alternatives as practice and performance. In reflecting on these concerns, this paper qualitatively explores the enterprising (rather than consumer enactment) of the ethical. Drawing on a multifaceted, three-year study of alternative consumption in Australia, the paper attends to the framing of ethical enterprise through business language, to the often ambivalent deployment of various commercial models and marketing strategies in the doing of ethical business, and to how a contestatory commerce is being imagined, especially in terms of its relations to a politics of social and economic change and to a commercial mainstream. Informed by work on markets as pragmatically assembled and on the economy as multiple, emphasis is placed throughout this article on ethical enterprise as a space of political ambiguity and as a gesture towards an alternative commerce that displaces an understanding of ethical consumption as resting on the actions of the virtuous consumer.

1. Introduction

The inner-urban Melbourne consumer, like others across the city's sprawling suburbs, is one who frequents and utilises predominantly mainstream (that is, both market dominant and culturally prominent) retail environments. The corporate supermarket remains overwhelmingly central in Australia as an everyday shopping destination, while other key areas of consumer spending such as clothing, appliances and hardware are equally corporatized. But increasingly, these familiar shopping terrains are interrupted by a different retail experience. Inner-urban Melbournians can, in fact, enter a network of 'alternative' physical and virtual consumption spaces. They can purchase almost all their food and household goods at farmer's markets, wholefoods and cooperative stores, or through food box schemes specializing in organic or community agriculture. They can dine at cafes boasting fair trade, local and socially responsible products and/or business models. Clothing also, labeled sustainable or ethical, can be easily obtained both physically and on line. Car-dependence can be jettisoned in favour of a sharing economy model of on-demand car hire. Travel can be undertaken at eco resorts or through culturally sensitive tours. Even a financial future can be secured through ethical investment advisory services.¹

Of course, we would be hard pressed to find such a uniformly ethical shopper in Melbourne – or elsewhere in the world's wealthiest cities. Such a pure consumer is imaginary; and is, indeed, the butt of jokes mocking the self-righteous preciousness of the inner-city bourgeois. Moreover, the consumption alternatives now on offer – at least to those who can afford the often high prices – sit alongside much older distributive forms that variously embody both thrift and the non-corporate; the open-air fruit & vegetable market, the second-hand store, the high street independent shop. Perhaps most keenly of all, the claims to ethics, sustainability and fairness now made by a plethora of products and the businesses purveying them can ring entirely hollow, while the political impact of the individual, ethical purchase seems illusory.

This is to rehearse the now standard critique of ethical consumption, a politics of the marketplace variously invoking a disposition towards the sustainable, the globally fair, the socially just, the organic, the local, the humane. It is a critique that intensifies in face of the growth – in many western cities – of an alternative enterprise sector that feeds and feeds off the figure of the ethical consumer. The expansion of such enterprise appears to speak all too clearly of the rank commercialization of the ethical purchase. It speaks also, however, of how challenged (and challenging) commerce can be when it becomes entangled with discourses of oppositional politics and with claims of social change. The

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¹ This retail geography of alternative commerce has been observed of other cities in the western world. See, for example, [Barnett et al. \(2005\)](#).

default option for many a critic is to deeply problematise any such entanglement of politics and the market, of civics and consumption – especially through deployment of that favoured derogatory ‘neoliberalism’. I admit to sharing in (some of) this cynicism. The ethical, sovereign consumer is an easily deconstructed and lampooned entity, while the endless monikers of ‘earth friendly’ ‘sustainable’, ‘fair’ ‘organic’ and ‘local’ appearing on the worthy product disguise deep contradictions and are readily appropriated by a corporate capitalism.

Yet, settling for this dismissive image of ethical consumption – and the commerce underlying it – is frustratingly un-inquisitive and delimiting; especially when it comes to the kind of network of enterprises I alluded to above. The everyday commerce of ethical consumption – of running an ethical business – has been relatively neglected by scholars in the field; it is the ethical consumer that has borne the brunt of analysis. I tack differently in this article. Drawing on a multifaceted, three-year study of ethical consumption in Australia, this discussion qualitatively explores and conceptually positions the enterprising of the ethical. In undertaking this task, I problematize the recourse in much critique to easy characterisation of such ‘alternative’ commerce as always already enclosed in neoliberal frameworks. Instead, I narrate how the *doing* of an alternative commerce is imagined and performed across a range of ethical enterprises; and I interrogate how this takes place in relation to a politics of social and economic change and to a commercial mainstream. A number of contentions inform this analysis. First, this article seeks to recognise the precarious autonomy of alternative commercial models and of the practices ethical enterprises employ, even when those models and practices appear to be encased in a neoliberal logic. Second, I emphasise how those who operate alternative enterprises retain a critical sense of the political ambiguities of ethical consumption, but do so – unlike the distanced observer – through an immersed engagement with this terrain. Third, and perhaps most importantly, I argue that an attention to ethical consumption as commerce is crucial to moving beyond a reduction of this politics to consumer agency.

In what follows, I first discuss recent scholarship on ethical consumption and position this article in relation to a theoretical literature on markets as pragmatically assembled and on the economy as multiple. In Sections 3 and 4, I move – through drawing on interview material – to constructing a narrative of one enplaced enactment of an alternative enterprise sector. Here, I explore the framing of ethical enterprise through business language, the deployment of various commercial models in the doing of ethical business, the perceived clash of politics and profit, and the tenuous status and state of alternative commerce in relation to the corporate. These sections engage also with a sense of ethical enterprise as a spatial imaginary, as not only occupying given inner-urban and/or sub-cultural locales – in this case in Melbourne – but as enplaced politically and commercially; and in ways that potentially redefine the parameters of a contestatory politics of consumption. In concluding, I reiterate the emphasis placed throughout this article on ethical enterprise as both politically slippery and as a crucial gesture towards an alternative commerce that displaces an understanding of ethical consumption as resting on the actions of the virtuous consumer.

2. Enterprising the ethical

Scholarship on ethical consumption has burgeoned in the last decade across a range of disciplinary fields, in part evidenced by a steady stream of edited collections (Harrison et al., 2005; Micheletti et al., 2006; Lewis and Potter, 2011; Shaw et al., 2016). An attention to the figure of the ethical consumer has been particularly dominant in business studies, especially in relation to the so called ‘intentions-behaviour gap’ or the apparent failure of consumers to translate their stated beliefs into ethical purchasing decisions (Auger and Devinney, 2007; Eckhardt et al., 2010; Bray et al., 2011; Carrington et al., 2014). This focus on the consumer is present also across the social sciences.

Pre-eminent here has been the work of Micheletti and Stolle on ‘political consumerism’ (Micheletti, 2003; Stolle and Micheletti, 2015). For Micheletti (2003), the politicized consumer – whose choices are informed by values, virtues and ethics – is no hypocrite, but constitutes an agent of social change by way of engaging in what Micheletti calls ‘individualised collective action’, in contrast to the ‘collectivist collective action’ characteristic of traditional social protest. Ethical consumption decisions, then, may well be self-interested but they link us also to a network of citizen-consumers and to collective political goals.²

Others, while not entirely dismissive of ethical consumption, have been less concerned with consumer choice and far less celebratory. There is now a broad body of socio-cultural analysis exploring the exigencies of making the ethical self (Varul, 2009), examining the unevenness and inconsistencies of ethical commitment (Eden et al., 2008; Adams and Raisborough, 2010), and problematizing the citizen-consumer couplet and its threatened reduction of civic engagement to market choice (Soper, 2007; Johnston, 2008; Lockie, 2009; Lekakis, 2013a, 2013b). Fair trade has figured prominently in much of these and other studies with a number of writers shifting attention from the consumer to the ‘fair’ commodity. This is a market object that is understood as deeply contradictory; at once connecting the western caring consumer to the distant Third World producer but simultaneously romanticising these commodity relations and bolstering a Northern governance of Southern production standards (Freidberg, 2003; Bryant and Goodman, 2004; Lyon, 2006; Guthman, 2007; Varul, 2008; Goodman, 2010; Dolan, 2010). Most relevant of all to the present discussion has been the rather sporadic academic interest in ethical consumption as alternative commerce. A range of studies have variously demonstrated the tenuous boundaries between alternative and mainstream business practices (Crewe et al., 2003), the dilemmas and contradictions of ‘selling virtue’ (Kennedy, 2006), the easy appropriation of citizen-consumer discourses by corporate retail (Johnston, 2008; Johnston and Szabo, 2011), and the performativity of alternative commercial place as a theater of the ‘good’ commodity (Coles and Crang, 2011). What perhaps unifies these studies is the firm sense, to cite Goodman and Bryant (2013), that alternative business ‘environments, discourses and performances’ are ‘ripe with material and discursive ambiguity’.

In recognising this ambiguity, much of the more critical work on ethical consumption is marked by a deep ambivalence towards the contestatory possibilities of this politics; acknowledging its transformative intent but rejecting a re-designation of political action as market agency (see Littler, 2008, 2011). One of the more concerted attempts to forge a path through this ambivalence has been the work of Barnett et al. (2011) on ethical consumption as advocacy and activism; a focus that relates closely to this Australian study. Barnett and colleagues importantly explore how the figure of the consumer is rhetorically mobilized in ethical consumption campaigning. Moving to grasp something of the field of agencies involved in the assemblage of ethical consumption as politics and practice, they see campaigning organisations not as valorizing neoliberal consumer choice but as contesting consumerism and embedding ethical consumption in broader movements for social change (see also Littler, 2008; Humphery, 2010, 2011). In this, the work of Barnett and colleagues connects with a shift across a number of disciplines to envisaging consumption and consumption alternatives as terrains where the consumer as moral agent is problematized. Attention is drawn instead to the network of entities – advocacy organisations, certifying bodies, marketing discourses, retailers, products, packages, infrastructures and so on – that configure alternative consumption as practice and performance.

Following these lines of analysis, what I want to suggest here is that if the advocacy and activism of ethical consumption can be read as working on a number of political levels and as displacing, as much as

² This has been more recently re-articulated by Stolle and Micheletti (2015), though with a recognition also of the possible limits to this thesis.

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