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# Ordinary ethics and craft consumption: A Southern perspective



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## ABSTRACT

Geography has recently experienced something of an 'ethical turn', and much attention has been focused on consumption as a site of ethical practice. Studies of ethical consumption tend to focus on explicitly socially or environmentally responsible purchasing decisions, but a growing body of research on 'ordinary ethics', starting from the premise that most consumption has a moral dimension, has opened up the notion of what counts as ethical to include everyday habits, considerations and desires. There remains, however, relatively little appreciation of the ethical agency of consumers within the global South, and little consideration of how enactments of ordinary ethics within Southern contexts may deepen understandings of the practices and meanings of diverse forms of consumption. Addressing this gap, this paper explores accounts of producers and consumers of craft in informal trading spaces in Cape Town, a city that 20 years after apartheid's end remains deeply racially segregated and has seen numerous incidents of xenophobic violence. It is in this context that I unpack the ethical dimensions of a seemingly trivial form of consumption, arguing that sites of informal trade may provide spaces for the expression and enactment of care for the other. While not always entirely positive, these interactions reveal a complex moral landscape where shared identities and mutual recognition underpin mundane economic transactions. The paper concludes that ordinary ethics of care for the other go beyond explicit, rational responsibility, and that informal spaces of trade should be considered as key sites for the exploration of consumer ethics.

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## 1. Introduction

The relationship between ethics and consumption has recently been the focus of much geographical scholarship (Popke, 2006). Geographers have been at the forefront of debates on how ethics, particularly through practices of care or responsibility, are enacted through consumption. Through research into forms of explicitly ethical consumption (such as Fair Trade networks), and through studies of the often exploitative nature of mainstream commodity networks, scholars have shown how 'every act of production and consumption and every act of everyday life links actors to millions of unseen others' (Beck and Sznajder, 2006, p. 22).

Much of this work thus aims to connect producers, consumers and other actors across distance, opening up what Freidberg (2003) terms the 'ethical complex' in the context of globalised trade. But a complementary body of research has emerged in anthropology and geography that is best described as being less about 'ethical consumption' than about the (diverse) 'ethics in consumption' (Barnett et al., 2011; Clarke et al., 2008; Popke, 2006, see also Adams and Raisborough, 2011). This work theorises a broader field of consumer ethics, exploring the idea that morality is expressed not only through conscious, rational, socially or

environmentally responsible consumption, but also through 'ordinary' shopping habits and decisions.

Crucially, this work takes as its point of departure the understanding that *all* consumption practices have a moral dimension, and that care for the self and others are central to decisions about and acts of purchasing goods. A vital contribution made by this body of theory is therefore its foregrounding of everyday consumption as ethically significant, shifting understandings of ethics beyond those practices and commodities that are explicitly labelled as such, to examine the much richer question of how ethicality or morality<sup>1</sup> infuse the quotidian realm.

<sup>1</sup> It is by no means a given that these two terms describe two distinct sets of dynamics. Contextualising these terms historically and theoretically, Littler (2009) argues that there is a large overlap between the two, and that 'ethical' is preferred over 'moral' in contemporary humanities and social sciences mainly because the latter has come to be seen as 'problematically loaded, saturated... with connotations of a comfortably smug and unreflective stance' (Littler, 2009, p. 10). 'Ethics', by contrast, 'is deemed to be more porous, more open to be used in multiple ways, and... has more potential to carry along with itself a greater degree of reflexivity as to how it is being used' (ibid.). It is also generally accepted that morality tends to be described more as a property of individuals while ethics describe a set of principles that are more social/collective. In this paper I mainly employ the term 'ethics' but refer occasionally to morality when referring to established literatures on, for instance, 'moral geographies' and 'moral economies', or when I want to emphasise the sense of personal obligation within thought and practice relating to ethical consumption.

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These bodies of literature are diverse and the theoretical and empirical paths taken by different scholars cover much ground. Overwhelmingly, however, these studies imagine the site of ethical consumer agency – in terms of both explicitly ethical consumption and ordinary consumer ethics – as being in the global North. While Southern *producers* figure large in this literature, there are relatively few scholarly representations of consumers and their ethical decision-making that are located in the South. Research is emerging that provides certain exceptions to this rule, and I unpack these in the following section. These examples notwithstanding, the dominance of Northern perspectives on consumer ethics begs the question of how our understanding of the latter may change or expand through the inclusion of Southern experiences.

Without implying that the South is an homogenous entity – indeed the different historical trajectories and political contexts of Southern countries matter profoundly – there are particular commonalities in consumption practices across many Southern contexts that contrast productively with the dominant Northern literature and may help to develop our collective thinking. A rapidly growing middle-class is just one phenomenon shared by many societies in the global South, notably the emerging economies of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (the BRICS countries), and is one that is profoundly altering both purchasing patterns in those countries and the meanings associated with particular forms of consumption. As geographers have long been arguing, what matters is not simply consumption, but the spatial relations that consumption engenders and in which it is embedded. Taking an explicitly Southern perspective on consumption, then, is necessary to develop a more thorough understanding of how space matters in consumer ethics.

In this paper I take inspiration from the idea of ordinary consumer ethics to frame a discussion about the consumption of craft in informal and market spaces in the city of Cape Town. While Cape Town is by no means representative of cities of the global South or even of South Africa, the city's informal trading spaces are shaped by multiple social relations including those between domestic and international tourists, local residents, and migrants from rural South Africa and other African countries, among others. In a post-apartheid city that still displays deep racial segregation, the producer and consumer narratives in these sites illuminate some small ways in which recognition and care for the other can play out. Although purchases of craft objects from small-scale, informal traders are ordinary and seemingly trivial, this paper argues that recognising the moral dimensions of all consumption opens up the ways in which these economic exchanges generate a space for shared identities and mutual recognition. In turn, the accounts presented here indicate that informal spaces of trade serve as fruitful sites through which to deepen understanding of ordinary ethics, with particular salience for Southern contexts.

## 2. Consumption as care

Recent research on ethics and consumption within geography fall within what Popke (2009, p. 435) refers to as ‘something of an “ethical turn”’ in the discipline, with ethics emerging as a central question ‘in a wide range of geographical discussions, from environmental issues to geopolitics’. Issues relating to consumption, and trade more generally, have been prominent in these discussions.

Many scholars in this field acknowledge the particular inspiration offered by David Harvey's (1990, p. 423) injunction to ‘get behind the veil, the fetishism of the market and the commodity, in order to tell the full story of social reproduction’, a call to action that reinvigorated a Marxist concern with the conditions of production and the role of consumption in perpetuating exploitation

and inequality. Along with Harvey, one of the guiding spirits of much of this work is Arjun Appadurai, whose bid to ‘follow the things themselves’ has prompted numerous anthropologists, geographers and other social researchers to trace ‘the social lives of things’, to take seriously the role of commodities in shaping social and political life (Appadurai, 1986, p. 5).

A wealth of ‘commodity stories’ has subsequently emerged within and beyond geography, many of which aim to open up to scrutiny the complicity of consumers in global economic networks that can be exploitative of both producers and other economic actors. While theoretical frameworks vary, a dominant theme in this body of work is the revelation and understanding of unequal power relationships in global economic networks. For some, this is a relatively straightforward project of defetishisation: ‘removing the veil’ (Hudson and Hudson, 2003) that hides the conditions of production from the (Northern) consumer, or exposing the ‘hidden lives’ of objects (Crewe, 2008, p. 29). For others, however, the concept of the fetish, and particularly the idea of the social analyst revealing a coherent truth behind the commodity, is more problematic (Cook and Crang, 1996; Cook et al., 2010; Goodman, 2004; Hughes, 2000; Foster, 2006).

Most recent work, therefore, aims less to unveil a linear producer-consumer connection and more to open up understanding of the diverse values, knowledge flows and power relationships that bring commodities to our shelves (Hughes, 2000). The most productive structuring metaphors for this research have been those of ‘circuits’ and ‘networks’ (Foster, 2006). This more interconnected approach to understanding commodities has largely displaced or at least expanded an earlier focus on commodity ‘chains’, and indeed explicitly critiques the latter for its linearity and its privileging of production as the most meaningful moment in the life of a commodity. Paying more attention to cultural practices at every stage of economic circulation (Cook and Crang, 1996; du Gay et al., 1997) the commodity stories that are framed as accounts of circuits and networks seek to foreground circularity and interconnection rather than linearity, and emphasise the multiple power relations, identities and meanings that are embedded in objects.

There have been critiques that commodity geographies narrated in this vein can be politically weak, encapsulated in Julie Guthman's suggestion (in Cook et al., 2010, p. 106) that ‘much has been read onto these ethical/alternative commodity production and trade networks, but investigations of the real politics of these things has revealed so much, well, less’. However, the ethical imperative driving empirical, theoretical and pedagogical (e.g. Cook et al., 2007) work in this field is clear. Without doubt a more complex task than a simple ‘unveiling’, the telling of such stories generally remains driven by a politics of care and recognition – trying to see the myriad social relations, and especially the inequalities, that structure global economies. In particular, this work is driven by the aim of connecting producers and consumers – enabling the latter to see or imagine the lives of those who produce the items that they use, wear, and eat on a daily basis.

A politics of care is also evident in the growing body of research on ordinary ethics, but this concept goes beyond explicitly socially or environmentally responsible purchases to theorise care ethics as much more than a conscious and reasoned sense of *responsibility* for the other. Rather than seeing ethics as ‘forms of altruism which enable consumers to overcome their self-interest [and thus valorise] the interests of others’, ordinary ethics ‘prioritise the awakening of enlightened self-interest in order to care for the other (Barnett et al., 2005), particularly through everyday habits and practices’ (Clarke et al., 2008).

The ‘everyday-ness’ that Clarke et al. refer to in the quotation above, is central to the conceptualisation of ordinary ethics. It speaks to an ordinariness both in terms of the objects of care,

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