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The political morality of food: discourses, contestation and alternative consumption

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Anthropology and sociology have been keen to show that consumption is a social and moral field, and that consumer practices are part of an ongoing process of negotiation of social classifications and hierarchies. Food consumption in particular has been associated with symbolically mediated notions of order (Douglas and Isherwood 1979). We know that particular foods are identified with annual festivities, set apart for specific categories of people, deployed to indicate indulgence or self-restraint, to declare one's own beliefs and to signify one's place in the community. While there may be no essential *national* food, food consumption has been implicated in the construction of national communities of taste (Douglas 1996; Bell and Valentine 1997). The private cooking routines of everyday life have contributed to the 'us and them' logic of community-building, setting local produce against far-away crops or the national against the foreign, and mapping these distinctions on the fundamental opposition between what is appropriate and what is corrupting. Food consumption has a long history of moral and political problematisation. The continual flow of gastronomic works which appeared across Europe from (at least) the nineteenth century, for example, responded to articulated political agendas, including the education of the public, the consolidation of senses of national identity and superiority, and even the marketing of national heritages.

Discourses surrounding the consumption of food, in particular, are doubly interesting. On the one hand, they are coextensive with practices that are, so to speak, necessary; in other words, they involve, in different ways, all social actors. On the other hand, and also because of its necessary character, food consumption is a contested moral field and one that is *discursively problematised* as such: it raises issues of fairness both within and without the human community, and is imbued with a set of crucial binaries such as immediate versus delayed gratification, nature versus culture, necessity versus luxury, body versus mind, etc. These ethical issues do not arise after the fact, as justifications; they are also part of the way food is consumed. They are, for example, used more or less implicitly in the qualification of food and food

consumption in everyday life – witness the pressure parents routinely exercise on their children to finish what they have on their plate by recalling the sufferings of Third World children.

In this view, food consumption is an important, if often forgotten, aspect of a consideration of the political morality of contemporary consumer practices and culture. In more than one way food is indeed crucial to how we negotiate consumption as a specific and meaningful set of activities. This is both because of the position of food in all societies we know – the role it plays in the different forms of cohabitation, for example – and because of its special features in contemporary societies. Food consumption is now a very dynamic field, with changes and innovations which are, to some extent, jeopardising its workings as a taken-for-granted route to people's sense of identity and belonging (Warde 1997). In general terms, food consumption is both imbued with morality and constitutes a territory for the practical translation of moral and political visions. Indeed, when we look at the ways consumer culture is being criticised in contemporary society, we see that food consumption is one way in which people start to imagine a different world.

Moral criticism, moral rhetorics and reflexivity

When it comes to consumer culture, feminists and critical theorists alike have played largely similar tunes (Marcuse 1964; Galbraith 1969; Bell 1976; Ewen 1976; Bordo 1993). This might be aptly summarised by saying that consumer culture is the antithesis and the enemy of culture: within consumer culture

individual choice and desire triumph over abiding social values and obligations; the whims of the present take precedence over the truth embodied in history, tradition and continuity; needs, values and goods are manufactured and calculated in relation to profit rather than arising from authentic individual or communal life. (Slater 1997: 63)

In recent times, such criticisms have been rendered through anti-globalisation rhetoric. George Ritzer's popular critique *The McDonaldization of Society* (1993), for example, considers consumer culture to have a dehumanising effect due to the rationalisation process which it embodies. McDonald's is taken as the paradigm case of a relatively new type of business which relies on the practical articulation of four principles:

- efficiency – an emphasis on saving time;
- calculability – an emphasis on quantification;
- predictability – an emphasis on replicability and standardisation;
- control – substitution of non-human for human technology.

The shopping mall, catalogue shopping, drive-through windows and fast-food restaurants appear as efficient means to a given end; and they entail a focus on quantity to the detriment of quality, relying on bureaucratic principles, standardisation and technological controls which should enable people

to know what to expect at all times and in all places. The result is a world of consumption which 'offers no surprises' (Ritzer 1993: 99), a world which is monotonous and morally empty.

These views seem to inherit as well as adjust a well-established moral criticism (Horowitz 1985; Porter 1993), one which in the twentieth century has been most famously developed by the 'Frankfurt school', that considers all consumption as potentially dangerous and corrupting. While this very stance has been for some time a dominating force throughout the academy, the renewed interest in consumption studies of the 1980s may be understood, at least to a degree, as an attempt to *de-moralise* the academic reflection on consumption and to treat it as just another social practice (Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Miller 1987). Daniel Miller (2001: 226) well exemplifies this view in a recent article in which he laments that the

discrepancy between the quantity and the quality of research is largely the result of the central role taken by morality within consumption research which has led to this branch of studies becoming largely a site where academics can demonstrate their stance towards the world, rather than a place where the world stands as a potential empirical critique of our assumptions about it.

He goes on to illustrate the poverty of a moral critique of consumption which forgets that human development may, and often does, go hand in hand with increases in material wealth. Such moral criticism typically holds a deeply ethnocentric (American) view, an ascetic and conservative vision of consumer culture, and the pessimistic, yet elitist, theory of consumer identity whereby the 'deluded, superficial persona who has become the mere mannequin to commodity culture is always someone other than ourselves' (Miller 2001: 229).

While Miller's observations are timely and important, we do have quite a lot to learn both from the rich symbolic structure which is embodied in contemporary material culture and from moral discourses from all quarters about consumption. Moral criticism of consumption is and should be an important object of study for those who want to understand consumer practices and culture. Indeed, in this chapter I contend that the study of the arguments and discourses deployed to criticise or otherwise qualify consumption is important to the political morality of consumption. When considering consumer practices as a moral field where social order is constantly produced, reproduced and modified, we should acknowledge discourses about consumption as an important part of that field. This obviously raises a number of theoretical and epistemological questions about the character and nature of *discourses*, issues requiring much more space than is allowed here. Still, it is useful to stress that a methodological attention to the discursive is compatible with a grounded, contextualised and, even, *materialistic* approach, if discourses are understood themselves as socially and institutionally located practices. In this view, discourses about consumption are best taken as a set of diverse practices which are assembled in specific contexts and reflect, more

or less directly, the consumer practices they describe and/or the moral and social order they take for granted, promote or otherwise qualify. While considering consumers' experience as ordered and patterned, and material culture as a means by which to fix the categories of culture (Douglas and Isherwood 1979) or to objectify people's values (Miller 1987), the sociology and anthropology of consumption have not been keen to pursue the study of the discursive in this way. Still, in a culture like ours, where the discursive has grown and is entrenched in various and ever-more compelling ways, we need to make more space for its analysis.

Thus, rather than take at face value what Miller considers is today's task for consumption studies – the attempt 'to rescue the humanity of the consumer from being reduced to a rhetorical trope in the critique of capitalism' (Miller 2001: 234) – we should consider that this rhetoric is itself part of a grammar, or a discourse, which is articulated in the world of consumption in specific ways and contributes to changes in consumer practices themselves. Social moralisation – in the form of moral rhetorics which accompany the use and deployment of goods – is an important process both because those rhetorics contribute to the classification and qualification of the goods to which they refer and because they help to define visions of social and personal order. If moral criticism should be left to philosophers we, as social scientists, nevertheless can – indeed should – consider closely the ways in which consumer goods and practices are moralised.

To proceed in this direction and strike the right balance between a due consideration of the discursive and an oblivious parody of the semiotic fallacy, we need further examination of the discursive as a practice. This might be done by further exploring the suggestion that accounts are themselves a practice, reflexively linked to the practices they describe. In recent social theory we often hear about reflexivity in conjunction with the idea of reflexive selves. This adumbrates the idea that modern individuals are caught up in the necessity of managing the fragmentation and complexity of everyday life, and through this they become reflexive (i.e. calculating) risk managers who choose different identities and lifestyles (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992).

'Reflexivity', though, has another meaning when it is applied to explanations, very much in line with its use in the ethnomethodological tradition. Harold Garfinkel (1985: 55) famously argued for the 'reflexive' or 'embodied' character of accounts, emphasising that 'the procedures used by members to make accountable' actions and situations are 'identical' to the activities through which members produce and manage such situations. In other words, actions and accounts are mutually constitutive: accounts construe and support the reality of those situations on which they comment, while they themselves are reflexively linked – so far as their intelligibility is concerned – to the socially organised occasions of their use.

Within this framework discourses about consumption are important objects of study as they can tell us something about the practical ways in which people make sense of the world, qualify it and their own practices, and act

accordingly. However, they should not be treated at face value as the symbolic manifestation of a commonsensical 'collective consciousness', as if they were one homogeneous, equivalent and straightforward source of analysis. Not all of the criticism aimed at ethnomethodology for its collaborative vision of the taken-for-granted and for the absence of a historical-institutional perspective is misguided. It is important both to give priority to the 'study of the methods through which we reach mutual understanding' (Garfinkel 1985: 84) and to consider how differently people from distinct institutional positions may act and, especially, how certain themes and evaluation criteria get entrenched and become hegemonic over time, that is, how power and history shape the conditions for mutual understanding. Discourses are different: they are pronounced by individuals (whose class, status, gender, etc., differ), in distinct contexts (more or less formal, institutional, etc.), and they are materialised in different ways (in manuals, magazines, etc.). Above all, discourses are visible in so far as they take a stand *for* or *against* something. They thus contribute through a continuing battle over how best to judge and justify something as worthwhile and right or as meaningless and corrupting.

In this view, moral discourses can be conceptualised as drawing on repertoires of evaluation, or 'orders of worth', which pre-date the individual and are available across situations even if they are realised, made salient and transformed by individuals in particular settings and circumstances (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991; see also Lamont and Thévenot 2000; and, for a critical discussion, Wilkinson 1997 and Wagner 2001). These repertoires become emphasised especially in moments or episodes of contestation that can up-end or overturn conventional and well-established discourses and frames of justification, by shifting to new forms of evaluation. Whether successful or not, contestation makes explicit what in normal circumstances is tacit and taken-for-granted.

Contestation may thus be seen as a multilevel phenomenon which involves distinct categorisation processes, of which some are identified as practical and others as discursive. In other words, leaving aside the important issue of their efficacy, these processes of categorisation can be more-or-less overt as well as more-or-less aware of their status as forms of protest. Like the reproduction of order, contestation happens first and foremost through a processes of routine categorisation. In everyday life distinctions are obviously made between types of consumer and consumer practice, and the notion that we are all consumers is as important as the notion that we all consume differently. The social regulation of consumption – with its levels of entrenchment ranging from implicit routines to institutionally enforced manners, highly formalised rules and the implementation of social policy – is based now, as it was in the past, on the classification of different goods, different spaces of consumption and different types of consumer. The literature on consumer practices is full of examples of the way in which consumers use goods to place moral weight onto their actions and relationships (see Bourdieu 1979; De Certeau 1984). Consumers as well as goods can be deemed

normal or deviant, fair or unjust, innocent or corrupting, articulating hegemonic views of consumption, choice and selfhood to negotiate their practices (Sassatelli 2001).

Similar classifications may be implicitly or explicitly directed against contemporary consumer culture, people expressing through their choices the fear of materialism which is so clearly epitomised by critical theories about consumption. Home-making or the socialisation of children as consumers are clear examples of this: when organising their houses, people try to take some measure to counter the anti-social potential of their material culture (Wilk 1989), as much as parents, when allowing children to use money, deploy clues which, although varying according to parental style, clearly work as ways of moralising consumption (Carlson and Grossbart 1988). Miller himself indeed reckons that consumption is an important means by which ordinary people confront, day by day, their sense of being in a world that is often oppressive, to the point that 'far from expressing capitalism, consumption is most commonly used by people to negate it' (2001: 234). Thus, while not all academics today find it either important or appropriate to moralise about consumption, non-academics routinely engage in such moralising. Overall, people's moralistic insistence on consumption signifies that it can be singled out as a weapon with which to attack large dehumanising processes such as commodification, globalisation, bureaucratisation, etc. This might be because, paradoxically, other spheres of action are less open to criticism or simply appear as beyond individual reach.

Here, I wish to pursue and develop Miller's belief (1987) that it is through consumption that people recreate the identity as labourers they feel they have lost, and thus use mass goods to counter the homogenisation of capitalist production. New forms of consumption, such as ethical and critical consumption, the adoption of a frugal lifestyle or the preference for fair trade goods are cases in point. In general, the discourses which surround these practices are important indicators of the extent to which the terrain of consumption is contested. More to the point, these discourses allow for an examination of the problematising of consumption as an ingredient crucial to the (often unconscious) pursuit of one's own moral superiority. They tell us something of a world envisaged by diverse actors as fair and just as opposed to what they perceive to be dominant and commonplace.

Alternative consumption and public denunciation

My concern here is with the set of discourses surrounding what appears to be an important feature of food consumption in contemporary western societies, discourses that I collect beneath the banner of 'alternative consumption'. Alternative consumption may be taken to identify a bunch of heterogeneous practices and discourses, stretching across the developed world. These consumer practices and consumption discourses herald a critique of (some forms of) consumption and propose alternative lifestyles. Their supporters

may be right in saying that we can take them as indicators of a quiet, slow cultural revolution which has to do with the fears about capitalist industrial methods of food production. Certainly, alternative food consumption is an important locus for conceptualising how certain materials are classified as good to eat, stressing that *goodness* is intimately associated with the attribution of a moral quality to food. This is so because the various alternative forms of food consumption and their discourses rarely deal with food alone: they rather place food practices in the context of broader issues and are implicated with notions such as justice, propriety, nature, health, etc., which work as codes for the practical justification of action.

The growth of self-professed *alternative* forms of consumption – as manifested in the rising demand for organic food across Europe and the USA or in the ever-growing variety of Fair Trade (FT) products available – is often taken as an example of what is widely portrayed as a bottom-up cultural revolution. Of course, alternative consumption cannot be considered as a purely demand-side phenomenon. The switch to green consumption, FT and sustainable production is, for example, supported also by Co-op retailers around the world – witness the strong statement released in 2000 by Aliza Gravit, Co-op America's executive director or the recent ethical consumption campaign promoted in Italy by Co-op Italia. From this point of view, green consumption may appear as a marketing strategy for product diversification (or even niche marketing) by relatively disadvantaged business in the face of growing concentration.

Nevertheless, alternative consumption seems to involve a shift in the way food is classified as 'good to eat'. Alternative consumer practices and discourses often up-end conventional and well-established discourses of use and recommendation. For example, Ethical Consumer – a major association for ethical and responsible purchases in the UK – offers its constituency a magazine (of the same name) which professes to be a guide to 'progressive products', helping to avoid unethical companies and products, and providing a list of 'ethical best-buy' options (www.ethicalconsumer.org; Gabriel and Lang 1995). Best-buys are indeed defined through a variety of ethical criteria, i.e. criteria which go beyond the short-term instrumental interest of the individual consumer shopping around to embrace long-term effects on a range of third parties. They include the impact on the environment (through pollution, nuclear power), on animals (animal testing, factory farming), on humans (oppressive regimes, workers' rights, irresponsible marketing) and 'extras', which involve more than one party, such as the use of GMOs. The particularistic, self-interested and instrumental logic of classical comparative tests – witness the 'value for money' approach of successful magazines such as *Which?* in the UK or *Altroconsumo* in Italy – is lacking here, though it is exposed. Furthermore, issues most conventionally related to food quality, such as safety and taste, are marginal even in an *Ethical Consumer* special report that extensively discusses a particular food. In a report on bananas, for example, consumers are invited to buy organic produce and encourage FT.

The report highlights primarily the wages and working conditions of banana workers employed by the major multinational companies, and the banana varieties which produce high yields but are more susceptible to pests, thereby harming the workers and the ecosystem. Only at the very end of the report is there a passing reference to *taste*, when it is pointed out that that FT bananas are ‘distinctively smaller and sweeter’ (Atkinson 1999). Overall, *Ethical Consumer* seems to propose a particular vision of the notion of quality: good for eating is first and foremost good for public values, such as the environment or human rights. Apparently safety, health and taste, or refined aesthetic pleasure, are not primary concerns.

Similar discourses about quality and food are typically articulated by a number of publications dealing with ethical shopping. The set of discourses which surround ethical shopping have to do with one of the themes which has been expunged from conventional consumer defence, i.e. the redistribution of resources and the role therein of demand. The conditions of labour in general and child labour in particular, as well as the south–north divide are the main codes marshalled to frame this issue. A recent guide to ethical shopping, for example, construes its readership as comprised of ‘consumers concerned about the working conditions under which the products they buy are produced in developing countries’ (Young and Welford 2002: ix). Consumers are said to be ‘raising consciousness’ and ‘becoming aware’ of a new dimension of consumption: the production–consumption equation is not a natural one, is not, that is, a morally neutral mechanism which every consumer has to exploit, it is exposed as a political and ethical relation. As free trade and globalisation are said to have removed the protecting influence of the nation states and the local communities, it is only consumers themselves who are seen as having the potential – and the duty – to safeguard both fair distribution and the environment. Indeed, the realisation that what the western world consumes is ‘subsidised by the poor’ in the form of unsafe and underpaid labour, and the exploitation of natural resources means that consumers can and must pressurise retailers, producers and governments to change their practices and bring about an equitable world trading system.

Food quality as a health and safety issue is never directly addressed in similar guides. These guides are typically concerned with offering a set of ethical criteria for the evaluation of a host of producers. When at all present, the currently hegemonic call for a healthful lifestyle is integrated with or, better, subordinated to concerns for the health of the community, the planet and the human species. Thus we hear that ‘in many parts of the world consumers eat so much that their health deteriorates, when at the same time millions of people in poor countries do not have enough to eat’ (Young and Welford 2002: x). Similar discourses are articulated by a number of environmental organisations. In the Worldwatch Institute press release which accompanies the report *Vital Signs 2001* (2001), for example, we find that the

all-you-can-eat economy is making the world sick. We're eating more meat, drinking more coffee, popping more pills, driving further and getting fatter . . . We're finding more and more evidence that the developed world's consumption-filled lifestyle choices are often as unhealthy for ourselves as for the planet we inhabit. (24 May 2001)

The underlying assumption here seems to be that healthful eating will be the natural result of a fairer, more sustainable, system of production and trade.

Conventional issues of health and safety are still relevant, though, as they offer alternative themes opportunities to reverberate in larger social circles by clinging on to widespread motives. The most important contestation episodes and narratives are indeed themselves often related, and they refer to episodes of breach of trust in the market brought about by health risks associated with industrial food production and globalisation. Eric Schlosser's best-selling *Fast Food Nation* (2002), a powerful attack against industrialised food production and servicing, points to both environmental and labour issues, and to threats to human health such as E.coli and BSE which are prompted by the minimisation of costs logic of the fast-food industry. The BSE crisis in particular has indeed been incorporated into the wider campaign against McDonald's. In Italy, for example, there was a 'Boycott Day' following the discovery of a case of BSE among cattle raised by McDonald's itself. To broaden its reach and penetrate new sections of the public, the campaign's organisers can therefore count on a most sensational theme. This is then articulated through the usual environmentalist arguments, such as that meat production entails an inefficient use of resources, as well as criticism of aggressive advertising, and fears of globalisation and homogenisation.

In recent times there have been a host of *ad hoc* consumer boycotts and campaigns which have helped consolidate the field of alternative consumption. Some campaigns, such as that against McDonald's, have placed the emphasis on safety and the environment. Others have concentrated on the conditions of labour, e.g. campaigns against Nike. Still others have stressed environmental and humanitarian issues, as did campaigns against Nestlé's distribution of artificial baby-milk in Africa or the wider movement against GMOs. The anti-McDonald's campaign and similar focused initiatives show that, besides entailing a sombre shift in everyday purchases, alternative consumption may be sponsored on special occasions that take the shape of specific campaigns or boycotts. These are best understood as episodes of contestation. Following Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (1991), we might focus on the production of agreement in a case of public denunciation, a route which may make more visible the taken-for-granted criteria marshalled for justification. From a social-theoretical point of view, these situations help us consider that individuals are constantly required to interpret their situations, with structure–culture being at the same time a resource for agency and the product of interaction. From a more empirical point of view, these are episodes where new and distinctive forms and rhetorics for the classification of food and consumption may get entrenched and obtain wider attention.

From 'fair trade' to community barter

It is not easy to draw an inclusive map of the issues which are comprised within the boundaries of alternative consumption. Many forms of alternative consumption share some kind of interest in environmental values (Goodman 1999; Murdoch and Miele 1999). For this reason Mary Douglas (1996) has branded them as instances of a 'movement of renunciation', or 'non-consumption', akin to that of early Christianity or of Ghandi, which puts public or collective goods before one's own individual desires or involves 'a rejection of the world as we know it'.

There are, however, some difficulties with this view. For one thing, it is difficult to consider all the instances of alternative consumption as comprising a cohesive movement, at least in the absence of a relatively abstract definition. This might be provided if we look at the minimum common denominator of the many voices that come together in a major event which aims specifically to critically address western consumer culture – the so-called 'Buying Nothing Day' (www.buyingnothingday.co.uk; see also www.adbusters.org). This is a day of public denunciation and protest in the form of boycotts and other events which is now celebrated in several European countries as well as the USA and Canada. People are invited to 'switch off' from shopping for one day and to consider that 'over-consumption' is 'the root of global disasters' such as climate change. What seems, at a first glance, an invitation to turn away from the excesses of consumption is indeed a melting-pot for the amalgam and distillation of many forms of alternative consumption. Environmental, humanitarian, ethical and political motives, for example, are all present in the discourses that accompany the Canadian web resources:

the rich Western countries, only twenty per cent of the world population, are consuming eighty per cent of the earth's natural resources, causing a disproportionate level of environmental damage and unfair distribution of wealth. As consumers we need to question the products we buy and challenge the companies who produce them. (BND-UK press release, 23 November 2001)

Most of the themes deployed in the initiative are only superficially close to an ascetic rhetoric of renunciation. While there are attempts to expose 'shopaholicism' as a condition that is reaching epidemic proportions, it is very clear that it is not *shopping* in itself that is harmful, but rather that people typically shop without considering issues such as the environment and poverty in Third World countries.

Most of the themes articulated by the campaigners in this 'anti-consumerist' syndicate are related to food – from the negotiation of the notion of *necessity* with respect to the north–south divide, to environment and sustainable agriculture, to new patterns of consumption relying on self-production. The separation of consumption and production is exposed and various ways of re-embedding consumer practices in the local natural environment, in communal–social relationships and in the production process are advocated. Consumers are invited to take action by considering alternative

combinations and recombinations of production and consumption. Contrary to the classical free-market rhetoric, only more integrated forms of economic life – localised and community based – can give consumers more control over their choices. This is mirrored by the idea that product labelling, as advocated by traditional consumerist campaigns, is not enough and that ‘ethical consumers’ ought to know the ‘sustainability cost’ of their choices – i.e. how much pollution has been created and how many non-renewable resources have been spent in the manufacture and the distribution of any given product. Here, consumer sovereignty is something other than consumer choice as predicated on the variables singled out by neo-classical economics and free-market ideologies alike (i.e. price and quantity). The logic of value-for-money does not hold when the target is both individual satisfaction and a set of public goods. Consumer sovereignty itself is predicated not on hedonistic premisses but on responsibility. All in all, this may suggest that in many forms of alternative consumption there is – to varying degrees – an attempt to re-establish a direct relation to food (and goods in general). This attempt appears to be aimed at countering *risk* as the perception that one is no longer controlling one’s material world, a perception which accompanies the growth of material culture and the separation between the spheres of production and consumption (Sassatelli and Scott 2001).

While we may consider that the boundaries of alternative food consumption themselves are defined by the tension involved in establishing a different relation to food, and even when a variety of alternative consumption issues come together in an overtly *anti-consumerist* initiative like the ‘Buying Nothing Day’, it is still possible to identify distinct and, at times, contrasting issues. As I have suggested, not all of the alternative forms of consumption are characterised by environmental concerns in the same way – nor only by those concerns. Each form of alternative consumption is, furthermore, internally complex. Work on vegetarianism (e.g. Twigg 1983; Beardsworth and Keil 1992), green consumption (James 1993) alternative green consumption (Belasco 1993) and organic food (Miele and Pinducciu 2001), for example, indicates that distinct themes and issues typically contribute to each specific form of alternative consumption and that they are far from being internally coherent. For example, the demand for organically grown vegetables comes from diverse sources, from a large vegetarian movement as well as health-conscious *and* gourmand carnivores; meanwhile practices and issues may be synergistic or not – just as green consumers may or may not sympathise with the redistributive concerns which inspire FT initiatives. Such contradictions might be acknowledged, yet they are not tackled easily by activists themselves. For example, *Enough!*, a magazine published by the Centre for a New American Dream (www.newdream.org) which campaigns for a more healthful and sustainable lifestyle, celebrates the rise of organic food consumption and the fact that major multinationals are getting into organic business, while recognising that organic food is still too expensive for many consumers.

While it is important to acknowledge their variability and internal complexity, precisely because different instances of alternative consumption are strongly linked – sometimes in contradictory ways – it remains important to consider them together as a specific domain. To that end, and in order to draw an inclusive space while considering its internal complexity, it is useful to portray some of the main characteristics of the most significant forms of alternative consumption. In fact, alternative consumption practices vary according to their overt *target* – the consumer herself or himself, the community or nature – and their declared *scope* – challenging contemporary capitalism, or offering an expressive investment, or, finally, providing alternative forms of integration in contemporary capitalist culture.

Working in this typological fashion allows a map of the domain of alternative consumption (figure 8.1) to be drawn that helps to identify its diversity. Initiatives such as community bartering are meant to subvert the functioning of the capitalist economy and can thus be contrasted with frugal consumption movements which push for a rearrangement of individual consumption–production practices in order that the individual may adjust to adverse capitalist conditions. More precisely, community bartering is an oppositional, expressive and community-centred phenomena – the most famous instance of which is Ithaca Hour, a system for the local exchange of goods and labour based on barter. Frugal consumption is characterised mainly as a non-subversive, instrumental and self-centred way of consuming, concerned with ways of saving money on basic or frivolous consumption so as to invest in meaningful, durable goods. Vegetarianism, when it is not merely a personal health choice, is an expressive phenomenon which addresses the boundaries of the edible, negotiating a different relation with nature whereby the human and the animal are reallocated. While organic production may be considered to negotiate food quality in relation to a renewed relation to land, sustainability and traditional farming, the FT initiatives negotiate food consumption with reference to a renewed attention to local communities and a clear opposition to globalisation and economic concentration.

While still partial, this map helps to qualify some of Douglas’s remarks on green consumption. Discussing environmentalism, risk and blame allocation Douglas (1996: 161) wrote that ‘though there is a movement of renunciation,

	Self	Nature	Community
Subversive			Community bartering
			Fair trade
Expressive	Organics, vegetarianism		
Integrated	Frugal consumption		

Figure 8.1 The domain of alternative consumption

the main criticism is not against the consumer, but against authority'. Yet, if we look at the discourses which are produced in the context of the forms of alternative consumption illustrated above, only those instances of consumption which are strictly self-oriented might be said to fulfil this specification. Mainly, it does not appear that what Douglas considered typical of alternative consumption in early 1990 holds in the same way today: blame is not just externalised – placed on companies and authorities – but is internalised – placed on the individual as a consumer.

The emphasis on the consumer as a political and moral actor is probably the main shift to have happened in the last decade, shaping the contemporary landscape of alternative consumption. Historically, we may trace this shift to the coming together of traditional consumerist issues (relying on possessive individuality as much as the market ideology which is confronted) and environmental issues (which shift attention to the communal dimension of consumption, emphasising public as against private satisfaction; see Sassatelli 2003). Their synergy is probably to be related to how globalisation has been perceived. Globalisation is often perceived to be fuelling an explosion of consumerism that poses serious threats to the natural world. In this context, as *Enough* points out, it appears 'absolutely vital' that 'products and commodities be produced and harvested differently – with a long-term focus on resource conservation, labour and community impacts, and limiting waste production' (Taylor 2000: 11).

In general terms, we may say that the consumer is thus considered both increasingly 'active' and increasingly 'public'. As a consequence, the dominant attitude is not that of renunciation of consumption, but rather that of a re-evaluation of what it is to consume. *Oneworld*, a US based organisation, brings together a wide number of associations, NGOs and foundations which describe themselves as working for social justice, and deals with, among other things, ethical consumption. It accepts the fact of consumption while scrutinising how it is carried out in western countries.

Almost any consumption – we find it in the self-presentation of *Oneworld* – uses up resources. But since one can't live without some consumption . . . how could I live just as satisfyingly with less? People are increasingly experimenting with living simply but more fulfillingly. (www.oneworld.net)

Oneworld thus promotes 'elegant sufficiency', which, we discover, is a mixture of environmentalism (e.g. opting for sustainable wood furniture instead of mahogany) and detachment from mass-fashion. Its emphasis is on *choice* as a political and ethical process – indeed, that it is only as such that we can speak of choice. We are invited to consider that 'to buy is to vote' and that 'we vote "Yes" with every purchase we make – a pound of bananas, a tank of diesel fuel – and we vote "No" with every purchase we turn down, forcing the companies to diversify into products we prefer'.

These themes can be further explored by looking at *Ethical Consumer*, the UK-based consumer organisation which proclaims itself as the only truly

‘alternative’ one. This organisation considers that individuals are helpless only if they decide to be so: through their consumption they can encourage ‘sustainable businesses’ that do not exploit or pollute. Ethical consumerism is thus said to offer a ‘powerful additional tool’ to traditional political action (i.e. joining a party or supporting campaign groups) that is considered on utilitarian grounds to be ‘both practical and accessible’. As an alternative consumer association *Ethical Consumer* insists on ‘convenience’ as a plus of ethical buying:

after all, everyone needs to go shopping or to consume resources in one way or another. As an ethical consumer every time you buy something you can make a difference . . . send[ing] support directly to progressive companies working to improve the status quo, while at the same time depriving others that abuse for profit. (www.ethicalconsumer.org)

The core of ethical consumerism is thus practical, ordinary and mundane: we are urged to check our own daily purchases: ‘buy things that are made ethically by companies that act ethically’, i.e. ‘without harm to or exploitation of humans, animals or the environment’. This can be achieved through a combination of different types of action, from positive buying (favouring ethical products, be they FT, organic or cruelty-free goods), to negative purchasing (avoiding products you disapprove such as battery eggs or cars with polluting fuel systems), to company-based purchasing which targets one business as a whole (e.g. the boycott against Nestlé). Consumer choices become *actions* in the strong sense, i.e. those capable of making a difference – consequential actions. Choice as expressive of power, and therefore of *duty*, is also a key theme in discourses surrounding other forms of alternative consumption, including fair trade initiatives: we can ‘make a difference with every cup’ of coffee, says a well-known book on FT coffee (Waridel 2002). It might be too early to say whether this prefigures a shift in the notion of choice itself. Yet, it accents choice as a public, other-related and therefore moral action, rather than a self-interested, private and therefore amoral affair.

Conclusion

This chapter has developed the idea that consumption is a moral field and that we must study its political morality as an ongoing process of negotiation of the social order. Moral discourses surrounding consumer practices are crucial to that process and should be studied as an important indicator of what it is to consume. Different moral rhetorics and orders of justification become visible and are stressed especially in moments or episodes of contestation. These episodes often overturn conventional and well-established discourses of quality, use and recommendation. Contestation itself is related to a breach of trust in the market, the effects of which will vary along with specific political, cultural and organisational features. This general framework has here been applied to the specific field of food consumption.

Looking at discourses surrounding different forms of alternative food consumption, from FT to organic produce, from vegetarianism and frugal consumption to community bartering, one could say that they vary as to their target – be it the individual consumer, the community or our relation to the natural – and their scope – subversive, expressive or integrative. While acknowledging the differences within these forms of alternative food consumption, this analysis has offered an initial map indicating how diverse moral qualities are attributed to food. Food quality is both shaped by technological processes and continually negotiated via the (contested) attribution of moral value. While the scope of alternative consumption is still to be ascertained, the discourses which surround it indicate a shift in the definition and evaluation of consumer choice. Individual choice is charged with political power and appears to be defined less in terms of *rights* than of *duties*.

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