Report

• Background

This project is situated in a number of academic, policy, and practitioner debates. Firstly, literatures on sustainable consumption have focussed on the potential of consumer agency as a driver of changes in overall patterns of consumption. A prevalent focus of this literature has been upon the need to overcome various obstacles to behaviour change. While an information-led approach has been subjected to criticism (e.g. Hobson 2003), this field continues to presume that the primacy vector of agency is people’s roles as consumers. Secondly, the same assumption that acting as consumers is a potential route for agency is positively affirmed in recent literature on the rise of anti-consumerism, anti-sweatshop campaigning, and global environmentalism (e.g. Ginsborg 2005). Thirdly, a wide range of critical commentary supposes that the rise of so-called consumer society leads to the decline of political activism and civic participation (e.g. Marquand 2004), on the grounds that consumerism is an individualistic pursuit.

This research project sets out to reconceptualise the growth of ethical consumption initiatives in the United Kingdom. In so doing it calls into question these shared assumptions that ‘the consumer’ is the animating vector of identification and agency behind them. We build on research that recognises consuming, exchanging, and shopping as thoroughly social activities (Miller 1998) embedded in social practices (Shove 2003, Warde 2005); and research that seeks to understand the politicization of everyday consumption using the tools and concepts of political science and political sociology (Micheletti 2003). This literature leads us to two related concerns: with understanding the role of intermediary actors in defining everyday consumption as an ‘ethical’ terrain and redefining ‘the consumer’ as a vector of political agency; and with understanding the ways in which ordinary people engage with attempts to enrol them into broader projects through a register of ethical ‘responsibility’. Our initial research design therefore drew on concepts from governmentality studies (Rose 1999) to conceptualise the growth of ethical consumption in terms of strategic interventions into everyday practices through the dissemination of discourses and devices that encourage and enable people to adopt new patterns of consumption for a diverse range of reasons.

• Objectives

The project had five main objectives.

Objective 1: To develop a conceptually informed understanding of the pragmatics of ethical decision making in consumption practices.

This objective was met by a critical analysis of policy and campaign documentation in the areas of ethical consumption, sustainable consumption, fair trade, and organic food from the late 1980s onwards. Recursive discourse analysis of these documents was undertaken to identify understandings of the motivations of consumers and other actors identified as agents of change in consumption. This analysis was supplemented by critical analysis of academic literatures in business ethics, sustainable consumption, the anthropology of consumption, and the sociology of consumption. This critical analysis was used to develop a conceptualisation of ethical consumption as the articulation of existing ethical concerns with explicit projects aimed at transforming consumption processes in the interests of environmental sustainability, trade justice, and human and labour rights.
Outputs relating to this objective:

- develop the literature on governmentality to build a conceptualization of the growth of ethical consumption initiatives in terms of strategic interventions which aim to *articulate* various political programmes (e.g. environment, trade, human rights) with the everyday contexts of care-giving and social reproduction (Barnett et al 2005b)

- develop a critical analysis of the strategic deployment of the rhetoric of consumer power in ethical consumption campaigning around a double rhetoric of responsibility: simultaneously problematizing people’s consumption habits by reference to their distant consequences, and exhorting their potential agency to contribute to transformative projects by exercising choice more responsibly (Clarke et al 2006a);

- develop a practice-based approach to understanding the use of philosophical concepts in understanding and evaluating the politics of consumption (Barnett et al 2005c).

- develop an understanding of how existing ethical repertories (e.g. faith-based commitments) are extended into ethical consumption practices (Cloke et al 2006a).

**Objective 2: To develop an understanding of the practical strategies used to facilitate the adoption of ethical consumption by organisations and campaign groups.**

This objective was met by a critical analysis of policy and campaign documentation, through in-depth interviews with key actors in ethical consumption campaign organisations and ‘ethical’ business initiatives, and through focussed case studies of specific campaigns and initiatives. Our analysis demonstrates that, while the rhetoric of consumer agency is prevalent in ethical consumption campaigning, practical interventions often seek to a). engage other aspects of people’s personal identification (e.g. as parents, as members of faith communities, as professionals); and b). to change systems of collective provisioning ‘behind the backs’ of consumers by transforming the design and management of infrastructures of consumption. We develop this finding that ‘the consumer’ is neither the primary target or vector of agency in ethical consumption initiatives by examining the aims and objectives guiding the deployment of various discourses and devices.

Outputs relating to this objective:

- develop an understanding of the ways in which ethical consumption initiatives deploy information primarily to generate *narratives* in the public sphere and in everyday life, in order to encourage debate about issues of environment, climate change, sweatshops, trade justice, etc; and to establish the legitimacy of organisations as *representatives* of popular concerns on these issues (Malpass 2006b);

- develop an understanding of the practical devices used by campaign organisations and ethical businesses to enable people to adopt ‘ethical’ consumption behaviours as routine aspects of everyday life (Clarke et al 2006c).

- develop an understanding of alternative business strategies used to enrol people into ethical consumption practices, focussing on organic vegetable box-schemes (Clarke et al 2006c), feminist entrepreneurship in fair-trade retailing (Malpass et al 2007a), and campaigns around fair-trade cotton (Malpass et al 2007b);
- develop an understanding of the place-based politics through which local interests and everyday concerns have been articulated with programmes around 'global' issues by transforming collective infrastructures of urban consumption (Malpass 2006a).
- develop an understanding of the longitudinal development of campaigns which use themes such as ‘fairness’ to connect ethical consumption to distant people and places as well as to provide pathways to participation in wider campaigns of social justice (Cloke et al 2006b).

**Objective 3: To develop a conceptually informed understanding of the performance of ethical identity through the situated engagement of commodities in everyday life.**

This objective was met through research on both self-identified ethical consumers and ordinary citizens of Bristol. Committed ethical consumers were accessed through a case study of local networks of fair trade buying and selling in and around Bristol, and two focus groups recruited through *The Ethical Consumer* magazine; ordinary citizens were accessed through a series of 10 focus-groups held in different social areas of Bristol. In both cases, our research demonstrates that people engage with ethical consumption initiatives not primarily as rationalising consumers, but as engaged/or and sceptical citizens who engage in forms of practical reasoning about the demands placed upon them.

Outputs relating to this objective:
- develop an understanding of the rationalities of organisations and participants involved in local fair-trade networks. This shows that organisations seeks to engage and extend people’s existing commitments, and that people adopt ethical consumption practices as a supplement to deeper forms of identification, membership and participation (Clarke et al 2006b, Cloke et al 2006a);
- develop an understanding of how these engagements with organised practices of global solidarity is mediated by identifications with local social networks, personal commitments, and place-based identifications (Clarke et al 2006b, Cloke et al 2006a);
- develop an understanding of the mechanisms of discursive problematization through which ethical consumption initiatives address ordinary people, and through which people ‘horizontally’ negotiate their own concerns with these ‘vertical’ demands on them. This shows that people can and do engage critically with demands that they act responsibly, by using reasoned forms of talk-in-interaction to consider the degree to which various ethical maxims could and should hold for them (Malpass 2006b, Barnett 2006);
- develop a theoretical approach to understand the processes through which top-down initiatives engage with the contexts of everyday life. This understanding is critical of approaches to ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘advanced liberalism’ that assume that programmes of economic transformation and political rule seek to transform the subjective identifications of ordinary people (Barnett et al 2006a).

**Objective 4: To map the ways in which ethical consumption practices are socially differentiated according to axes of class, ethnicity, gender, location.**
This objective was met through research on ordinary citizens accessed through a series of 10 focus-groups held in different social areas of Bristol. Groups discussed awareness of and extent of involvement in various forms of ethical consumption, as this was understood by participants. While the selection of different social areas does not guarantee representative sampling of all social groups, it did enable us to access a diverse range of participants differentiated by class, gender, ethnicity, race, age, income and education. Detailed discourse analysis of these focus group discussions provides insight into two related dimensions of social differentiation through which ethical consumption initiatives operate: i). differential access to the material resources required to engage in ethical consumption practices, including income, but also including spatial accessibility to retail opportunities that are geographically concentrated in specific parts of metropolitan areas; ii). differential access to the symbolic and discursive resources that enable people to actively engage with the proliferating demands on their time and responsibilities, and which also enable them to effectively articulate their own understandings of ethics, politics, and responsibility in wider public spheres.

Outputs relating to this objective:
- examine the diverse forms of ‘ordinary ethics’ that people bring to their engagements with ethical consumption initiatives (Cloke et al 2007a).
- examine the forms of reasoning that people deploy to negotiate multiple demands for them to act responsibility in their everyday consumption habits (Barnett et al 2007).
- examine the targeting of schools as key sites by campaign organisations, and the active participation of schoolchildren in fair trade campaigning in relation to citizenship curricula (Pykett et al 2007a, 2007b).

Objective 5: To contribute to a critical, conceptually robust understanding of the potential of consumption practice as a medium for geographically expanded citizenship mobilisation.

This objective has been met by pursuing empirical analysis hand-in-hand with critical reflection on existing academic and activist literatures on global social movements, transnational citizenship, and geographies of responsibility. Our findings focus on three related arguments: i). that people’s engagements with consumption-oriented campaigns are guided by concerns with aligning their everyday routines with their moral and political commitments in order to sustain a degree of personal integrity in an unequal world; ii). that consumption is understood by campaign organisations as a surface of mobilisation through which to generate public awareness and enrol potential supporters; that this form of mobilisation does not substitute idealised models of consumer agency and market power for other modes of civic participation, associational organisation, or collective action, but acts as a supplement to these activities; iii). that the problematization of consumption through the rhetoric of ‘consumer’ agency and ‘consumer’ responsibility is a contingent achievement of strategic actors.

Outputs related to this objective
- develop a theoretical understanding of the dynamics of ethical problematization in the contemporary world, understood as a phenomenon through which diverse actors seek to engage ordinary people with ‘global’ issues by problematizing the mundane and intimate spaces of everyday life. This is the focus of Barnett et al Politicizing Consumption, contracted to Blackwell’s Royal Geographical Society and
Institute of British Geographers Book Series, to be submitted by end 2007 (See Appendix A).

- outline the range of strategies and objectives through which contemporary ethical consumption initiatives seek to engage the support of ordinary people. This is the focus of Cloke et al Governing Consumption, contracted to Berg’s Culture of Consumption Series, to be submitted by end of 2007 (See Appendix B).

• Methods

The project used various qualitative methodologies to generate empirical materials and analyse data:

1). Discourse analytic approaches (Wetherell 1998) were used to develop critical analysis of documentary evidence and in-depth interviews of self-identified ethical consumers. Attention was focussed on the uses to which different discourse registers and rhetorical figures were put by different actors. This approach informed the findings noted under Objective 2 above on the pragmatics of ethical consumption initiatives, and findings noted under Objective 3 above on the ways in which people critically engage with these initiatives.

2). Focus groups were used to generate empirical data on a diverse range of social actor’s understandings of and commitment to ethical consumption (Objective 4). Our research drew on literature that emphasises the distinctive analytical criteria of focus group research (Wilkinson 1998) in order to develop an empirical understanding of the process of ethical problematization of everyday consumption.

3). Case study methodology was used to analyse the interactive dynamics of governing contexts of consumption and governing the self as defined in the original research outline. These case studies used desk based research, in-depth interviews with key actors, and participant observation to investigate the rationalities through which organised campaigns and ordinary people engage with one another around various ‘problems’ and ‘dilemmas’ related to everyday consumption. 6 case studies were undertaken: an examination of Bristol’s Fairtrade City Campaign (Malpass 2006a); an examination of local networks of fair-trade consumption organised by Traidraft (Clarke et al 2006b); an examination of campaigning for fair-trade cotton in UK retailing (Malpass et al 2007b); an examination of alternative business models used in ethical consumption initiatives (Clarke et al 2006c); an examination of the relationship between ethical consumption initiatives and broader campaigns around global development and trade justice (Cloke et al 2007b); and an examination of fair-trade campaigning in local schools in Bristol (Pykett el al 2007a and 2007b).

• Results

Knowledge:
Ethical consumption campaigns aim not only to provide information to consumers, but rather aim to problematize everyday practices of consumption by shaping the terms of public debate and by getting people to talk reflexively about their habits and routines (see Clarke et al 2006b, Malpass et al 2006b, Cloke et al 2007a).

Citizenship:
Involvement in ethical consumption practices depends on and sustains broader forms of commitment and engagement motivated by concerns with trade justice, environmental sustainability, and global poverty (see Barnett et al 2005a, Clarke et al 2006a, Malpass et al 2006a, Cloke et al 2007b).

Citizenship:
People engage critically and sceptically, in the registers of citizenship, with proliferating demands that they take personal individual responsibility for numerous ‘global’ problems through their everyday consumption practices (see Malpass et al 2006b, Barnett et al 2007, Cloke et al 2007b).

Practices:
Ethical consumption initiatives are most successful when they succeed in finding ways of enabling changes in practical routines of consumption, whether at the level of the household or at the level of collective infrastructures of urban consumption (see Clarke et al 2006c, Malpass et al 2006a, Cloke et al 2007a).

Theory:
Theories of neoliberalism and advanced liberalism pay inadequate attention to the interactive dynamics involved in programmes which seek to reshape everyday conduct ‘at a distance’ through registers of “responsibility” (Barnett et al 2005b, Barnett 2006).

Activities

**User Engagement**

- A project Steering Group was convened to advise on research questions and design, and feedback on drafts of papers and comment on research analysis. This Steering Group included representatives from Ethical Consumer magazine (Rob Harrison), The Consumer Association (Allan Williams), New Economics Foundation (Julian Oram), DEFRA (Tracy Bedford), Levett-Therivel Consultancy (Roger Levett), and one academic working on another Programme project (Terry Newholm). Two meetings were held in Bristol, at the University of Bristol in October 2004 and at the Open University Regional Centre in May 2006; members of the Steering Group also attended the end of project Workshop at the Royal Geographical Society in July 2006. In addition to these meetings, drafts of early research papers were circulated for comments and feedback to members of the Steering Group.

- The project co-sponsored *A Taste of Life Exhibition*, a Fairtrade Foundation Photographic Exhibition, at the CREATE Centre, Bristol, June/July 2004. This was part of the official programme of the Bristol Fairtrade City campaign; Barnett presented a lecture, ‘Consuming ethics’, at the Launch of Bristol Fairtrade City Campaign, June 28th 2004, CREATE Centre, Bristol. This event was attended by members of the general public as well as participants in local fair trade, organic, and ethical consumption networks, local authority officials, councillors and MPs, trade unionists, and representative of local businesses.

- The project organised a Workshop on ‘Governing the subjects and spaces of consumption’ as one end of project event. This was one part of Interdependence Day, held at the Royal Geographical Society, London, an event organised by the Geography Department and the Open University to develop innovative forms of public communication around global issues of climate change, trade justice, and human rights; see <http://www.open2.net/interdependenceday/index.html>. As part of this wider event, the project also sponsored the Clothes She Wears exhibition by Siobhan Wall, an artistic installation run in conjunction with the Clean Clothes Campaign (Netherlands) and Labour Behind the Label (UK).
Malpass and Cloke participated with local MPs, Government ministers, local Labour members, ethical businesses, and Traidcraft representatives, at a ‘Big Conversation’ meeting on Fair Trade held at Bristol University, 22nd September 2004.

Barnett contributed to ESRC’s coordinated response to national government Sustainability policy, Seyfang, G. and Brockett, B. (2004). ‘Taking it on: Consultation paper for developing UK sustainable development strategy together’.


Malpass attended and contributed to the Fairtrade Towns workshop at The Fairtrade Futures Conference, Oxford, November 2004.

Malpass attended the Annual Conference of the Soil Association and contributed to the ‘Ethical Trade’ workshop, Newcastle upon Tyne, January 2005.


Malpass presented findings a Traidcraft church group in North Somerset, including participants in the in-depth interviews that formed part of the case study, July 2006.

**Contribution to Programme Events**

Cloke attended Cultures of Consumption Programme Workshop, Birkbeck College, March 2003.

Barnett presented a paper at the ESRC Cultures of Consumption and Sustainable Technologies Programmes Theory Workshop, Birkbeck College, London, October 2003.

Clarke and Malpass contributed a paper on focus group methodologies to the Programme’s Researchers Workshop, May 2004.


Clarke attended Managing Anxiety workshop, July 2004.

Barnett, Clarke, and Cloke attended the annual Programme conference, University of Manchester, September 2004.

Clarke attended Consumption Routines workshop, December 2004.

Barnett and Cloke attended a workshop organised by the alternative hedonism project, London Metropolitan University, June 2005.

Barnett presented a paper at the Interpretative Approaches to Governance workshop, Birkbeck College, July 2005.

Barnett, Clarke, and Cloke attended the annual Programme conference, Strathclyde University, September 2005, where Barnett participated in a panel discussion on Consumption and Care.
Barnett and Clarke attended Bronwen Morgan’s end of project meeting at the University of Bristol, December 2005, where Barnett presented a paper on methodology and argumentative subjects.

Barnett attended a methodology workshop organised by the Citizenship cluster, LSE, March 2006.


Barnett and Clarke attended workshop on interpreting talk data at British Library with members of Jackson et al’s food chains project and Kneafsey et al’s alternative food networks project, July 2006.


**Conferences and Seminars**

**Conference Papers presented:**
- Cloke presented ‘Consuming faith in the city’ at *Faith and Poverty in the City* conference, University of Antwerp, December 2006.

**Seminars presented:**
- Barnett presented ‘The political rationalities of fair trade consumption in the United Kingdom’, Department of Geography, University College London, October 2006.
- Clarke presented ‘Spaces of ethical consumption’, Department of Geography, University of Southampton, January 2006.
Clarke presented ‘Spaces of ethical consumption’, Department of Geography, University of Reading, January 2007.
Cloke presented ‘Consuming faith’, Department of Geography, University of Cambridge, April 2005.
Cloke presented ‘Ethical citizenship’, Department of Geography, University of Liverpool, October 2005.
Cloke presented ‘Ordinary ethics’, Department of Geography, University of Exeter, Jan 2006.
Cloke presented ‘New ethical geographies’, Geography, Queen Mary, University of London, April 2006.
Cloke presented ‘Make Poverty History’, Geography, National University of Ireland, Galway, September 2006.
Cloke presented ‘Ethical citizenship’, Geography, University of Aberdeen, November 2006.

Outputs
We have pursued an active policy of dissemination from before the formal start of the project in October 2003. This has included presentation of papers at international conferences, organisation of conference sessions, and seminar presentations. This has involved addressing diverse audiences of social scientists, policy makers, and campaign activists. Such presentations will continue during 2007.

We have also developed an innovative range of user engagements, including exhibitions and action research with the Bristol Fairtrade City campaign.

We have produced and continue to maintain a project website:
<http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/staff/cbarnett/ethicalconsumption.htm>

We have developed a substantial programme of publication from the project. During the lifetime of the project, up to the end of October 2006, this has included an agenda-setting theoretical paper was published in 2005 in *Antipode*; a Programme working paper; an invited contribution to an international collection on political consumerism; an invited contribution to The Consumer Association’s *Consumer Policy Review*; an invited contribution to a agenda setting book on *The Ethical Consumer*; an invited contribution to a special feature of *The Independent* on global responsibility; and an invited contribution to a roundtable discussion of the politics of consumerism in *Soundings*. A further seven journal articles and chapters are either in press or under review, and others are in preparation for submission by mid-2007. Two book contracts have been signed, with Berg (Cultures of Consumption Series) and Blackwell (RGS-IBG Series).

Impacts
Evidence of impacts includes:

Our initial theoretical position paper (Barnett et al 2005b) has already elicited a number of citations in academic journals, including in three separate ‘Progress Reports’ in Progress in Human Geography in 2006, indicating the contribution of the
project to the re-conceptualisation of consumption, ethics, and the politics of global responsibility.

- Barnett was consulted by the New Economics Foundation/Friends Provident Foundation research project on mainstreaming ethical finance, in October 2006.
- The project has addressed non-specialist and non-academic audiences through publication in *The Independent*, *Soundings*, and *The Ethical Consumer* collection.
- Involvement in national and international academic networks has included an invited contribution to a collection on political consumerism published by the Nordic Council of Ministers; Barnett has also developed research linkages with Janet Newman and Susan Smith from the Cultures of Consumption programme around the theme of *Publics and Markets*, the theme of a workshop organised at the Open University in October 2006 and building on issues emerging from the Programme.
- The project has contributed to emerging research themes at the Open University, including an ESRC Seminar Series on The Good Citizen (2006-2007), an ESRC/NERC Seminar Series on Interdependence (2005-2007). Research findings from the project have also been integrated into OU Distance teaching materials (see N. Clark, D. Massey, and P. Sarre (eds.) (2006), *A Lively World*).
- Cloke is developing the project’s findings in collaboration with Professor Justin Beaumont (University of Groningen) and Professor David Ley (University of British Columbia) into a bid for European Science Foundation funding to explore *Faith-based organizations and human geography: managing poverty and injustice in cities*.

**Future Research Priorities**

We want to highlight four issues for further research that arise from this project. In each of these four areas, our research suggests that taken-for-granted assumptions about the potential or willingness of people acting as consumers in relation to ‘global’ problems needs to be treated with much greater scepticism than is often the case.

1). Consumer Discourse and Representing ‘the Popular’: Further research is needed into the multiple objectives that the discourses of ‘the consumer’, ‘choice’, and ‘responsibility’ enable different actors (civil society as well as state and corporate) to pursue. In particular, the implications for democratic politics of the ways in which the discourse of consumerism enables different actors to speak for ‘the popular’, in its diverse and conflicting senses, requires further theoretical and empirical investigation.

2). Consumerism and the Political Rationalities of Alternative Globalisations: Further research is needed into the forms of mobilisation, collectivization, and coalition-building that is emerging across the diverse fields of contemporary consumption-focussed activism. In particular, the ways in which recourse to consumer repertoires of mobilisation, membership, and representation represent a shift in organisational form towards advocacy-based campaigning requires further investigation.

3). The Ethical Problematization of Consumption: Further research is required on the ways in which ordinary people engage with the multiple demands for them to act responsibly in relation to various global crises. In particular, research is required that focuses on how the capacity of citizens to engage with contemporary problematizations of personal and political responsibility is differentiated by their command of *material resources*, but also by the *cultural capital* that enables them to ‘answer back’ to demands to be ‘ethical’ and ‘act responsibly’, as well as the forms of *associational culture* to which they belong and which shapes capacities to transform embedded practices. This research will require the further development of qualitative data generation *and* analysis that is sensitive to the modes of reasoning that people engage in when confronted by ‘vertical’
demands to take more ‘responsibility’. It will also require a focus on the gendering of ethical consumption campaigns and the gendered social relations through which ethical consumption is embedded in everyday contexts.

4). Transforming Practices and Infrastructures of Consumption: In light of our research findings that ethical consumption campaigning is often aimed at, and most effective in, transforming policies and practices of collective provision, further research is required into the opportunities and obstacles to forms of intervention that work ‘behind the backs’ of ordinary people.

References:


*Economy and Society* 35, 279-306.


BOOK OUTLINE

Making the Global Self: Politicizing Consumption in an Unequal World

CLIVE BARNETT, PAUL CLOKE, NICK CLARKE, AND ALICE MALPASS

(Blackwell, RGS-IBG BOOK SERIES)

Introduction

Section 1: Theorizing Consumption Differently

1). Questioning Neoliberalism: Dynamics of individualisation

2). Practising Consumption: Infrastructures of choice

3). Problematising Consumption: Making-up people as responsible consumers

Section 2: Doing Consumption Differently

4). Grammars of Responsibility: Responsible consumers, sceptical citizens

5). Local Networks of Global Feeling: The political rationalities of fair trade consumption

6). The Politics of Place beyond Place: Fairtrade urbanism

Conclusion
APPENDIX B:

BOOK OUTLINE

Governing Consumption: Political Rationalities of Ethical Consumption

PAUL CLOKE, CLIVE BARNETT, NICK CLARKE, AND ALICE MALPASS

(BERG, Cultures of Consumption Series)

Chapter 1: Understanding Consumption
Chapter 2: Governing Consumption
Chapter 3: Governing the Consuming Self
Chapter 4: Media Publics and Ethical Consumption
Chapter 5: Campaigning by Organisational Alliance: The Trade Justice Movement
Chapter 6: Governing Ethical Consumption at a Distance: Fairtrade City Campaigns
Chapter 7: Problematizing Transparency: The Moral Fibre Campaign
Chapter 8: Delivering Ethical Consumption to the Home: Riverfood Organics and Traidcraft
Chapter 9: Politicizing Pester Power: Ethical Consumption in Schools
Chapter 10: Conclusion: Placing Ethical Consumption