Buy Now, Pay Later

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When I was growing up, I remember my parents used to drink something called ‘Campaign Coffee’. Its name was always accompanied by a slight shudder because it was: a) quite expensive and b) pretty foul. Heroically purchased by a committed clique of clergy, NGO workers and the ‘loony left’, it was one of the very first attempts at trading with the Majority World in a way that was less exploitative.

Things have definitely changed since then. ‘Ethical’ shopping is all the rage these days. Consuming with a conscience – once seen as the preserve of beardy-weirdy tree-hugging freaks and barely registering on the radar of corporate execs and politicians – has suddenly burst noisily into the mainstream. You can now buy a more socially or environmentally responsible version of just about anything: clockwork mobile phone chargers, organic anti-wrinkle cream, recycled silk designer handbags, solar-powered bird baths...

Green shopping websites abound. Ethical consumer guides are dropping out of the most surprising magazines. Fair trade coffee tastes good these days, there’s an abundance of brands to choose from and you can drink it in Starbucks in 23 different countries, or – if you live in New England – even in McDonald’s.

Earlier this year Nestlé launched a fair trade coffee line. In May, long-time animal-tester L’Oréal (also part-owned by Nestlé) bought the Body Shop. In June, pile-‘em-high sell-‘em-cheap pioneer Wal-Mart announced it is switching much of its fruit and veg to organic. Ebay is even setting up a special ‘artisans’ site’ for fair trade producers. Welcome to the moral mainstream!

Green futures

The so-called ‘ethical consumerism’ phenomenon is nothing new. I expect that, like me, many NI readers have been boycotting Nestlé – and other notorious transnationals – for years. I also suspect that, given you are reading this magazine, many of you also partake in the more positive pastime of trying to buy things that don’t cause harm to people and the planet. Depending on your circumstances, this could include buying fair trade and organic food and drink, supporting local independent shops and farmers’ markets, buying energy-efficient appliances, or shopping online for sweatshop-free clothes.

But we seem to have reached a tipping point. Although ‘ethical’ sales still only account for a tiny part of the global economy, analysts and companies firmly believe the future of retail will be green, and are rebranding and repositioning themselves accordingly. Rob Harrison from Ethical Consumer magazine has been charting this trend: ‘The big companies have moved into the ethical market defensively. They seem convinced it will become dominant in developed economies – there’ll be a broad ethical mainstream with most players guaranteeing basic ethical standards, with a super-ethical niche sitting on top.’
So what are we to make of this enthusiastic encroachment on to ‘our’ territory by the brands we love to hate? Are we witnessing the final triumph of progressive values over naked corporate greed? Should we junk the boycott and start buying Nestlé’s fair trade coffee in order to encourage them to do more? Are consumers becoming the *de facto* regulators of industry, curbing corporate abuse more effectively than any government has yet managed? Is this part of the answer to the world’s problems?

**A dangerous diversion**

We should certainly celebrate where we have got to. Those of us who have been campaigning for years against grinding global poverty, corporate carnage and ecological meltdown have started to win some important arguments. But though sustainable shopping is becoming big business, we shouldn’t pop the organic champagne corks just yet.

For a start, we should be wary of the claims being made. Irish rocker Bono, ever the self-appointed spokesperson for charitable causes, recently pontificated that: ‘Shopping is politics. You vote every time you spend money.’\(^1\) The view that you can spend your way to a sustainable world is echoed in much of the ethical shopping sector’s marketing. *New Consumer*, which purports to be the ‘ultimate ethical lifestyle magazine’, enthuses that: ‘creating a world that works for everyone has never been easier. It lies in your simple shopping decisions and lifestyle habits!’\(^2\) Steady on now. It would be great if this were true; but it isn’t.

In fact, what ethical consumerism can accomplish is limited in many different ways. Of course no-one wants to undermine the hard work, dedication and real progress of the many pioneers who have made consuming with a conscience possible. What they have achieved is amazing. But if we do not face up to the limitations of a consumer-driven approach to solving the world’s problems, openly debate the contradictions and shortcomings that are becoming increasingly clear, and refocus our attentions on collective political action, we risk heading down a very dangerous diversion that takes us away from the route towards genuine global justice.

The problem with the concept of ‘ethical consumerism’ is that it’s something of an oxymoron. The dictionary definition of ‘consume’ is ‘to destroy by or like fire or disease: to cause to vanish’. A consumer is ‘a person who squanders, destroys, or uses up’. So we may be trying to do it in an ‘ethical’ way (what’s ‘ethical’ is of course subjective, but let’s not even go there right now) but often we are still engaged in a destructive activity.

**Shop till we drop**

And consumerism is indeed destroying the planet. The fatal flaw in treating consumer-led growth as the main indicator of economic success in industrialized countries is that it assumes infinite growth is possible, and doesn’t take into account environmental and social limits. As a result, we are already well into the red, ecologically. The oil, water, land, soil, clean air and mineral resources we depend upon are under severe pressure or actively running out. It would take more than five planets to sustain the world’s current population at US consumption levels. Climate change, which is directly caused by human overconsumption, is already upon us and we in the industrialized world need to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions by 60-90 per cent to have any hope of averting its worst effects.
We need to change the entire structure of our exploitative, wasteful, resource-intensive economy; and that includes buying much less stuff. Of course, purchasing more sustainable versions of the things we actually need has to form part of the solution. No-one’s arguing against low-energy lightbulbs (unless they are being used to offset short-haul air flights, that is).

But so much of the ethical consumption boom focuses on luxury goods: fair trade roses grown in huge hothouses next to Kenya’s Lake Naivasha, sucking up precious water resources and then being air-freighted to Northern supermarkets; pointless gadgets such as solar-powered cappuccino whisks; silver cufflinks handmade in Mexico, screaming ‘gilt without the guilt!’ Their main impact is to make the shopper feel good – ‘I’m doing something for the planet!’ – without having to change their lifestyle one bit, while the companies laugh all the way to the bank.

This frustration is keenly felt by British environmentalist and writer George Monbiot. ‘We all deceive ourselves and deceive each other about the change that needs to take place. The middle classes think they have gone green because they buy organic cotton pyjamas and handmade soaps with bits of leaf in them – though they still heat their conservatories and retain their holiday homes in Croatia. The people who should be confronting them with hard truths balk at the scale of the challenge. And the politicians won’t jump until the rest of us do.’

Corporate self-defence

In fact, the rapid conversion of big business to all things ethical is not just about exploiting a lucrative new market and making efficiency savings – it is also a self-preservation strategy. As the science of climate change and evidence of shocking corporate practices in the Majority World have become undeniable, the writing is slowly materializing on the boardroom wall. How to avoid being broken up, regulated, eco-taxed, boycotted? Be one step ahead of the game and show you’re doing the right thing without the need for governments to resort to any extreme, potentially profit-curbing measures.

‘Our customers know that, if they shop at M&S, we’ll have done all the hard work for them,’ explains Mike Barry, head of corporate social responsibility at UK department store Marks & Spencer. ‘They’re interested in ethical issues, but they just want us to get on and manage them... What we’ve done is look at the market research, the focus groups, the way the media is playing it, the way the NGOs are playing it, and then transected all those issues. We’ve worked out what customers are beginning to tell us, anticipated it, then gone out and given them what they want.’

This is what is known as ‘choice editing’ and it’s the new industry buzzword. Quite simply, unethical options are removed from the market, ‘edited out’ by the company, reducing consumer choice in pursuit of the greater good. How do you stop people buying energy intensive incandescent lightbulbs? Just don’t offer them as an option to consumers. It’s as simple as that. The problem is that this approach relies on the company to really do what is most ethical, which from time to time will inevitably contradict what will make them money. So it’s possible that the best option for the environment would be not to buy a particular item from Marks & Spencer at all, but to buy it second-hand, or maybe borrow it, or even – are you sitting down for this? – to go without it completely. Given that the company exists to sell stuff, it’s hard to imagine ‘don’t buy this’ appearing as one of the edited options.

The voluntary nature of ‘responsible’ business is another severe limitation. How do you enforce it? How do you know whether what you’re being told is true, or just ‘cleanwash’? One of the depressing things
about researching this magazine has been the discovery that, as soon as you scratch the surface, almost nothing is as ‘ethical’ as it seems, especially if you look at the whole picture rather than squinting through specific ‘environment’ or ‘labour’ or ‘fair trade’ lenses.

Chipping away the ‘cleanwash’

It turns out that the boom in organics, far from boosting small-scale sustainable farming around the world, is industrializing the sector, squeezing the small farmers out and watering down organic standards.

Fair trade is increasingly driven, not by the needs of poor producers, but the demands of big business. ‘When fair trade cotton came on the market, you couldn’t get the bloody stuff,’ reveals Paul Monaghan, head of ethics and sustainable development at the Co-operative Group. ‘M&S went out and bought the whole lot. When fair trade roses came out, Sainsbury’s got them. We were all fighting over the roses.’

‘Lifestyle’ magazines revel in the feelgood factor.

Apparently the fair trade labelling organizations were put under so much pressure to deliver these new products that corners were cut and compromises made. They began to certify huge privately owned flower plantations rather than small co-ops, and certifying only the way the cotton is grown as fair trade – allowing the shocking possibility that, further down the supply chain, a garment made from fair trade cotton could be put together in a sweatshop and still marketed as ‘fair trade’ to oblivious consumers...

We know flying food around the world is environmental idiocy, but there are ethical issues raised by its more sustainable alternative – shipping. Seafarers are some of the most brutally exploited and abused workers in the world.

And what about the people who work in sectors not currently influenced by consumer power? Communities devastated by copper mines in Peru, palm oil growers in Indonesia thrown into jail for forming a union... The sources of their suffering are ubiquitous ingredients in Northern consumer goods. Must we really rely on NGOs to orchestrate costly campaigns on each and every one in order to mobilize consumer power to reform them? This is far too circuitous a route to bring about change.
Sugar coating on a bitter pill?

Of course there are many visionary people around the world who are really trying to make alternative business models work – and it’s worth taking the time to seek them out. For example, one of the first fair trade companies, Cafédirect, has two Southern coffee and tea producers sitting on its Board. They recently issued ‘ethical’ shares for investors to buy on the understanding that they would not require the company to maximize profits at the expense of its values – an unheard-of stipulation in most of the corporate world.

But by and large, producer power is conspicuously absent even in the ethical business arena. Consumer power still rules and Northern consciences seem to be the main beneficiaries of ethical consumerism so far. Indeed, it is difficult to find much that has been said and written about the phenomenon amongst Majority World commentators. Those I have spoken to have been dismissive. ‘It’s sugar coating on a bitter pill that can prevent us from focusing on real structural issues,’ argues Indian activist and academic Anuradha Mittal, a fierce critic of ‘corporate social responsibility’ initiatives that mask the misdeeds of the companies who signed up. It’s just a way for ‘middle-class NGOs to get a piece of the capitalist action,’ declares Firoze Manji from African social justice network Fahamu.

Others see this as yet another way in which the poor are being disenfranchised. If exercising consumer power is the way to bring about political change, then if you are not a consumer, you are excluded from the process. This is equally true within rich countries, where the ethical marketplace is largely a playground for the middle classes. If shopping is politics, then the rich and privileged get to hog all the votes.

Drowning out the mood music

So as a means to change the world, the ethical consumerist approach is a blunt and imprecise tool. It is most effective when used collectively and strategically. Fair trade would not have got into the public consciousness – and the supermarkets – without dedicated campaigning by thousands of people in their local communities. Many small producers in the Majority World are certainly benefiting even if they are a drop in the ocean compared to those whose livelihoods have been jeopardized by the trading system as a whole.

But if we give ethical consumers too much power, if we believe that the moral issues are black and white, if we get seduced by the idea that the market will respond to our ethical and environmental concerns, adapt accordingly and somehow the woes of the world will be solved, then we are making a huge mistake.

The mistake is partly to trust the market and ignore the central role governments must play in ending unsustainable patterns of consumption. Surely an important tool in curbing corporate abuse is to regulate against it. Governments can use taxes and other economic instruments to reshape economies and control markets, and can introduce and enforce ethical and environmental standards. Trade will not be made fair, paradoxically, by buying fair trade.

Governments must engage with changing the international rules that currently regulate it. None of these things are easily done, but we won’t achieve them by going shopping.
Perhaps an even bigger mistake is not to face up to the scale of change that’s required. Surviving the multiple impending catastrophes that our throwaway lifestyles have triggered will involve a seismic shift in the way we live our lives. We must move away from limitless consumer-driven growth and towards a sustainable, low-carbon model that meets everyone’s needs through more connected communities rather than gleaming shopping malls. Sometimes our most ethical shopping choice will be to buy nothing; to embrace the idea that less can be more. But this is the one message that is not coming through clearly – from NGOs, governments, business and the media. And this particular eco-bullet is one we now have to bite.

We should not get too obsessed by whether we as individuals are consuming as ethically as possible. It’s important and rewarding to do what we can, but the achievement of moral purity is an impossible dream in such an imperfect world. As Andrew Simms from the New Economics Foundation puts it: ‘Ethical consumerism is mood music, rather than a re-engineering of the economy in a meaningful way. It feels palliative – a passive observer, not an active agent of change. We’ve got to get away from the passivity of being defined as consumers, and start making things happen.’

Ethical consumerism offers attractively simple answers when these do not exist. Buying a different brand of detergent is easy. But effecting social change is hard. Becoming more politically engaged with the impacts of everything we do in our lives is daunting. But this rise in ethical concerns is a huge opportunity, showing that more and more people are willing to act on the most pressing issues facing the planet. The challenge now is to find a way to harness and channel all this energy into something far more ambitious than getting fair trade kumquats on to the world’s supermarket shelves.