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# Peopling the Practices of Sustainable Consumption: Eco-Chic and the Limits to the Spaces of Intention

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**Peopling the Practices of Sustainable Consumption: Eco-Chic and the Limits to the Spaces of Intention**

Raymond Bryant
Mike Goodman

Sustainable consumption—as one of the defining forms and processes of eco-chic—is gaining favour in the Global North as consumers increasingly vote with their shopping trolleys. For example, the fusing of citizenship, politics and consumption has helped generate a UK market for ethical goods worth nearly £47 billion in 2011, despite the continuing recession (*The Guardian*, 2012). Yet, debate has been sparked here. For some (Barnett et al, 2011), this is encouraging: consumers are acting politically without having to think too deeply about their impacts on people or planet and as a part of other 'political repertoires' like protesting and boycotting. Yet, consumers of commodities like fair trade coffee or organic tomatoes are located in situations distinguished by their enviable *ability* to govern themselves (Goodman et al, 2010) at the same time their eco-chic purchases working to 'save' poor Others and the planet. 'Care-full' shopping choices are thus made, albeit only thanks to the toil of producers and networks of transnational regulatory regimes. Consuming these goods—so the argument goes—not only allows the purchaser to engage with specific movements associated with these items, but, when atomised buying is aggregated, the magic of a broader consumer politics is also realised through market-mediated change. Others disagree pointing out that the politics of choice are not only historically and geographically contingent, but also unequal and unpredictably voluntary (Bryant and Goodman, 2004; Guthman, 2007). Either way, there has been little work engaged in either a 'peopling' or exploring the 'practices' of sustainable consumption and the growing networks of eco-chic.

This chapter is an attempt to begin to rectify this absence and do so in a particular way. Here, using three different cases, we wish to explore the tension-filled practices of the production of eco-chic goods as well as the consumption of some of these goods in the expanding middle-classes of parts of the Global South; in telling us something important about the embedded materialities, power relations and distinction-laden aspects of eco-chic and sustainable consumption, we hope to not only build on related and parallel work (e.g. Friedberg, 2003; Mutersbaugh, 2002; Sirieix et al, 2011; Wilson, 2010), but do so through novel theoretical and conceptual means. In this, we utilise the idea of the *spaces of intention* that stitch together the sites of production and consumption in eco-chic-ed, sustainable consumption as they work to connect relatively affluent consumers to poor(er), marginal producers. Directing us to fully contextualise the production and consumption networks of eco-chic in both time and space—thus, really asking for a shift from eco-chic to 'eco-social-chic'—these spaces of intention are thus linked into more relationally-related *networks of intention* that work to produce novel geographies of hope, care and responsibility. Here, these networks of the spaces of intention can be specific to particular commodities or classes of items, such as fair trade and organic and the line, or, at a more macro-level, they can be combined into the wider landscapes of eco-chic and sustainable consumption that the circulate as consumer-led cultural politics of capitalism designed to make 'better worlds'.

Yet, our specific interest in this chapter lies in understanding what these spaces may mean and how they operate—in short, are peopled and practiced—in an exceedingly unequal, market-driven world. For us, a key aspect of the spaces of intention is that these spaces assume a drawing of borders that exclude people and knowledge even as they define new networks and communities of the 'like-minded'. Yet exclusionary practices may lead to paradox inasmuch as 'communities' are based on unclear intentions. This chapter assesses selected exclusionary practices—with reference to the 'production spaces' of Costa Rica and

Mexico and the 'consumption spaces' of Malaysia—to highlight some ethical ambiguities and limits to sustainable consumption, market-led sustainability and, more broadly, eco-chic. We hope to contribute to a critical literature that debates the meaning and utility of alternative market-driven solutions to contemporary problems – a literature that does not simply view these spaces of intention as arenas of economic, political and affective opportunity but ones embedded with tensions and relations of power, class, contingencies and histories.

The chapter is organised as follows. First it outlines what we see as the spaces of intention in the complicated and ambiguous arenas where the material and discursive connections between and among eco-chic consumers and producers are constructed and made 'real'. Here we suggest that the drawing of borders and boundaries in these spaces—necessary in demarcating spaces and creating eco-chic markets—leads to exclusionary practices as much as novel networks of the spaces of intention. The chapter then considers the 'productionist' exclusionary practices from research done in Costa Rica and Mexico and 'consumerist' exclusionary practices from Malaysia. The conclusion then assesses the overall utility and prospects for and eco-chic consumer- and market-driven reformist politics or progress and livelihood betterment.

**The production of the spaces (and networks) of intention in eco-chic**

The sustainable consumption sector is predicated on the production of spaces of intentions that give it meaning and purpose. These spaces combine discourses and material practices, while linking together far-flung people and places to produce distinctive if changeable and always multiple ways of seeing and doing.

A variety of elements go into the making of spaces of intentions. First, this process involves *epistemic collusions* – a coming together of people and groups around a basic set of ethically-based knowledge claims that seek to establish the 'facts' in a given domain. These include such things as the need to reduce the human impact on the environment via 'less harmful' organic agriculture, the quest to tackle rural poverty through 'fairer' trade, or (in historical times) the imperative to eliminate slavery. The word 'collusions' is important here. Unlike the epistemic 'communities' described by Peter Haas (1991), which tend to suggest a more settled and predictable pattern of interaction, we privilege the perpetual contingency and ambiguity of the epistemological foundations of spaces of intentions. And yet, the great achievement of these epistemic collusions is that they enable an analytical and problem-solving set of practices to occur in the first place.

Second, spaces of intentions encompass *reflexivity-in-action* on the part of the diverse participants involved in the sector – be they producers, consumers, retailers, and so on. The degree of reflexivity naturally varies from person to person and group to group but helps to inform positionality in the process. The latter is not however purely or simply about crude function (e.g., I am a consumer, you are a producer), but also includes self-awareness of the *special* roles that the different actors play therein – producing 'quality' goods or paying 'premium' prices, for instance. Still, the conclusions that actors derive from the reflexive act can also vary dramatically, notably combining what James Scott (1990) has called in a different context 'public' and 'hidden' transcripts – discourses that are publicly admissible or not in light of their anticipated reception. At the same time, multifaceted and multi-actor reflexivity can be held in check by the general commitment to action. Because something 'must' be urgently done (about this or that problem), there is a tendency to ring-fence the potential for paralysing anarchy that might follow from a proliferation of reflexive acts among participants. Nonetheless, tensions persist here.

Third, spaces of intentions require *affective ordering* as 'distant strangers' develop selective and prioritised affective bonds. This is often centred on a normative sense of injustice that is directly experienced or otherwise 'witnessed' in social and/or socio-

ecological relations. Emotions play a big role here (Held, 2006; Pile, 2010). Thus, 'caring at a distance' is anchored by such things as empathy, joy and anger in complicated emotional geographies (McEwan and Goodman, 2010; Smith, 2000). These geographies help in turn to overcome or at least contextualise differences among participants involved in building spaces of intentions. Affective bonds thus help to stitch together spaces of intentions that link people and groups who have often never met – and will probably never do so. At the same time, volatility in the emotions and commitments of participants (who after all live in a wider world marked by conflicting and needs) suggests once again that ambiguity remains at the heart of the production of these spaces.

Fourth, there are *space-making activities* that involve the crafting of new forms of spatial understanding in order to overcome existing spatial barriers to effective action. On the one hand, there is the '*peopling*' of space through the identification of specific, 'special' individuals involved in production and consumption through product advertising, regulatory boundaries and the like. This activity directly challenges spatial anomie in the market through the personification of space. On the other hand, there is the creation of *place* in space – through the identification of specific, 'special' locations involved in production and consumption. This activity challenges spatial 'distanciation' by increasing awareness among participants of how seemingly empty space is in fact populated by unique places throughout the 'alternative' sector (Barnett et al, 2005). Through peopling and place-making activities, spaces of intentions thus take on a personality of their own – in a manner of speaking, they become 'warm' and 'enlivened'.

Finally, and perhaps most contentiously, spaces of intention necessitate the *production of borders*. Without some sense of what (people, processes, things, knowledge, etc) is inside rather than outside a given space, it becomes all but impossible to even speak of a specific space. Most work on borders has focused on their deployment around the 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1991) and 'containers' (Taylor, 1994) that are called the 'nation-state' (Flint and Taylor, 2007). Beyond debates over the geo-political nature and role of borders in relation to (inter) state action, work has probed how borders help to define both collective and personal identity (Newman and Paasi, 1998). Yet such identification is complex, contradictory and contingent – especially in light of processes of neo-liberalisation and globalisation that render borders simultaneously less and more important.[1] In a world of 'overlapping' sovereignties and territorialities, the meanings that attach to borders change even as their utility as a means of delimiting and regulating 'inside' from 'outside' is debated (Walker, 1990; Storey, 2001). Still, the production of borders inevitably and centrally revolves around specifying what is *excluded* as well as what is *included* in a particular space. In any given time and place, therefore, *certain* opportunities are opened up for *some* people even as *selected* opportunities are closed down for *other* people.

The various elements that go into the creation of spaces of intentions all seek in various ways to 'fix' social understanding and identity in relation to interconnected meanings of 'space' and 'intention' – the better to channel the energy of participants into achieving 'alternative' sector ends (eliminating poverty, 'cleaning up' agriculture, etc). Yet this is in many respects a Sisyphean task – a point that becomes clear when considering the inescapably *dynamic* and *differentiated* nature of these spaces and their connected networks.

Spaces of intentions differ in important ways from each other depending on the nature of the 'alternative' sector to which they are attached. Indeed, there is a continuum of these spaces ranging from the *diffuse* at the one end to the *concentrated* at the other end – with relative density notably contingent on the complexity of the issues involved. On the whole,

[1] For example, in relation to the movement of labour, see Spark (2006) and Shuttleworth (2007); for more theoretically inclined work on borders and boundary-crossing/boundary-work see, e.g. Mol and Law (2005), Eden et al (2006) and Goodman and Sage (2013).

more concentrated spaces of intentions seem to be easier ones in which to achieve progress towards goals than more 'diffuse' spaces. Thus, in the nineteenth century, the anti-slavery movement encompassed a boycott campaign of 'slave produce' (sugar, cotton) exported from the Caribbean and the United States (Sheller, 2001) that represents a good example of concentrated spaces. Here both the immediate target (undermine income that slave owners derived from slave produce) and the ultimate end (abolish slavery) were fairly tightly defined and hence relatively straight-forward to act on. In contrast, the fair trade campaign is an example of diffuse spaces of intentions precisely because the chosen tool (fair trade) is rather modest in comparison to the sheer complexity of the desired outcome (ending poverty through trade) and insofar as fair trade is only one part of the overall trading relations and economic commitments of poor participants. Worse, poverty itself has deep non-economic (as well as economic) roots – implicating a series of political and cultural processes that fair trade has little hope of changing in and of itself. In this regard, fighting poverty (via fair trade spaces of intentions) is somewhat akin to the battle against climate change (diffuse and relatively intractable), just as the historical example of combating slavery is reminiscent of the struggle over ozone depletion (concentrated and relatively manageable). From this perspective, the problem for many contemporary spaces of intentions (fair trade, organic agriculture) may well thus be precisely that they are diffuse in character – and hence can be more difficult to resolve than their concentrated counterparts.

A good measure of the dynamism associated with spaces of intentions relates to the different ways in which people enact their roles therein. One particular source of tension relates to the *individualistic* as opposed to *collective* tendencies in a given alternative sector. Thus, a notable feature in many such spaces is the prominent role of collectives and social movements in their operation. These include producer cooperatives (e.g. fair trade coffee) as well as NGOs and social movements (e.g. Oxfam) that find collective action most efficacious in achieving ends for reasons that might include economic efficiency, political security or even have an ideological basis. Yet, this needs to be set against the strong individualistic streak typically found in many of these spaces as they pursue social change in part through the market. Especially among consumers (but also often among producers), individualism is the leitmotif of action – even when such action is informed by the potentially 'unifying' elements of space making noted above (e.g., reflexivity-in-action, epistemic collusion, affective ordering). These divergent tendencies need not work against each other, but there is always the possibility that they might – leading to a general dissipation of people's energy when they do so.

Since spaces of intentions typically involve unequal relations of power, they are also often characterised by *cooperation and conflict*. That conflict among participants in these spaces is the norm should hardly surprise. For one thing, all of the elements noted above that go into the creation of spaces of intentions are potential minefields where both the subjective interpretations of actors and the (sometimes) unintended consequences of their actions are common. For another thing, the sheer number of people and groups involved (especially in diffuse sorts of spaces) represents a potential logistical nightmare, even when such things as 'fair' prices (for producers), 'quality' standards (for buyers), and 'fair' premiums (paid by consumers) are sorted out.

Indeed, the unequal power relations that are embedded into all spaces of intentions point more generally to a potential dark side to this sector. First, there is the way in which individuals or groups that lead in defining these spaces embed their own interests and concerns at the heart of the process – interests and concerns that may not be shared by all others involved. The material and discursive construction of these spaces is never neutral as it reflects the political, economic and cultural beliefs of those who construct them. Moreover, the construction process may have *unintended* consequences that are ethically dubious. For

example, the codes of conduct and labeling schemes that are an important part of the sector may provide a sense of security and sanctioned knowledge for some, even while enhancing the *in*security of others left marginalized under this system. The path of good intentions can be littered with unintended victims of eco-chic.

A second issue relates to the ways in which the malleable nature of these spaces of intentions can lead to their appropriation by individuals or groups who may use them in ways not intended (or desired) by those involved in their initial construction. Here, the ambiguous quality of human intentions comes to the fore – something that was first hinted at in our earlier discussion of epistemic collusion among participants. Such intentions are multifaceted. For instance, scholars note how those seen to be acting on behalf of others may be simultaneously pursuing their own self-interest – the two are not mutually exclusive (Bryant, 2005). People's intentions can also be duplicitous – intentions are either not what they seem or declared intentions mask non-declared intentions. This pattern of behaviour combining public and hidden transcripts may reflect wider changes in human conduct in an era of 'liquid modernity' in which 'flexible' personal and group identity formation is the norm (Baumann 2000).

A final issue is how spaces of intentions fare when opponents hit back. There is already the 'dilution effect' – a process whereby mainstream firms clamber on the alternative bandwagon in a process that all but drains that alternative of meaning. Other techniques may be deployed to take advantage of the fissiparous tendencies of 'alternative' sectors and their associated spaces of intentions. For instance, there is a standard strategy of seeking to drive a wedge between (often) Southern-based producers and (still frequently) Northern-based consumers taking advantage wherever possible of residual mutual ignorance in the sector that is related to space distanciation.

The discussion so far has defined what spaces of intentions are as well as some of the key dynamics and tensions that inform them, in relation to sustainable consumption and eco-chic more broadly. We next turn to a comparative empirical exploration of contemporary spaces that underpin the sustainable consumption sector. In doing so, we seek to assess both how these spaces of intentions work in general and how contention is often at the heart of their operation in particular. While not the only aspect under investigation, this is notably achieved by focusing on the role that exclusion plays in their working, beginning with those spaces of intentions linked to the places of production of eco-chic goods in Costa Rica and Mexico.

**Practicing Eco-chic: Ironies, Power and exclusions in the places of sustainable consumption production**

Much is often made in the 'alternative' sustainable consumption sector of the need to render as transparent as possible processes of production and consumption typically hidden in conventional market activity. Indeed, this transparency provides the basis—informational and imaginary (cf. Goodman, 2004)—that lets consumers articulate their 'ethical-ness' in the relatively comfy confines of the post-industrial North. Yet how do these spaces of intention—and here we refer to fair trade —operate? What is left out of these narratives and who or what is left out of the material networks that form the basis for the articulation of ethical subjects and spaces? Much work on sustainable and ethical consumption is only really engaged in telling one side of the story – that is, the 'happy' and 'consumerist' angle. Indeed, ethical consumption might well be

> … a *political* phenomenon … [and] one that deploys the register of 'ethics' and 'responsibility' in pursuit of some classically political objectives: collective mobilisation, lobbying, and claims-making. … [I]n these campaigns consumption is

> emphatically not understood simply in terms of a 'neoliberal' problematic of markets, exchange and choice. Rather, it is understood in terms that link material modes of consumption to the transformation of broader systems and social relations of production, distribution and trade …. (Clarke *et al*., 2007: 246; emphasis in original)

And yet, it is *exactly* the 'problematic' of markets, exchange and choice—i.e. the realities of doing 'ethical' business at multiple scales—that mould spaces of intention in ambiguous and politicised ways, especially in relation to sites of production. Thus, we suggest the need for more detailed research in this regard—involving a more rounded *peopling* of 'alternative' networks—to yield insights on the ethical tensions and limits to caring at a distance.

*Bounding Quality and People in Costa Rican Fair Trade Cacao*

One key factor that renders our understanding of spaces of intention more complex is the exclusionary practices of knowledge and taste that underpin them yet which sit uncomfortably with lofty network aims. Take product 'quality' – an issue that has long been an overriding concern in the 'alternative' market. This is certainly clear in fair trade (Bacon, 2005; Renard, 2005)—dogged as it is by a reputation for goods that taste horrible, look poor and appear unfashionably 'hippie'. As with sustainability standards in general, the exigencies of 'good taste' have livelihood consequences even for producers in 'socially just' markets. Thus, the creation of spaces of intention is party to processes of neo-liberal disciplining and associated exclusion—according to quality and taste—that reflect a reliance on market-based approaches. As such, these spaces are *bounded* entities – not open-ended meeting points for 'action-at-a-distance' (Barnett *et al*., 2005, 29). The example of fair trade and organic cacao networks in Costa Rica considered here underscores the ethical ambiguities and limits to spaces of intention as aspirations about product quality entail that some marginal producers end up excluded.

Indeed, in a cruel irony, demand for top quality in fair trade and other 'alternative' networks has had the unintended effect of sometimes leaving the poorest and most marginal producers on the outside of these networks (Moberg, 2005; Lyon and Moberg, 2010). This is a variation on the 'barriers to entry' theme that Guthman (2007) in particular has noted in work on organic foods, farming and labelling.

This quality 'problem' is neatly exemplified in what happened during a recruiting mission run by the Asociación de Pequeños Productores de Talamanca (APPTA) in the Talamanca region of Costa Rica several years ago, which is located near the northern Panamanian boarder and the Bri Bri Indigenous reserve. This cooperative sought to build up its exports of organic bananas and cacao by inducting new member-farmers. With this aim in mind, the mission interviewed candidates in the mountains near San Clemente above the lowland banana plantations run by Chiquita. As one of us recorded in his fieldnotes:

> After one or two successful stops at some individual farms (where new members were enrolled), we came to the settlement of one particular family which was studded with sweeping views of the Caribbean, two sets of cacao-drying racks, a small amount of land and the basic wooden-slatted buildings in which they lived. After the usual greetings, [one of the members of APPTA] shoved his hand into a bag of cacao that had come from the surrounding farm, while the other went off with the farmer to have a look at his production facilities. As the farmer left, [the APPTA member who stayed behind] turned to me with a rather bleak look and, after popping a bit of dried cacao into his mouth for a quick taste, shook his head. Curious, I asked him what the matter was; his reply was simple: 'Poor quality and taste'. The

> implication was that this very poor farmer would continue to be left to his own devices until the quality of his cacao improved, at which time there might be room for him in the cooperative. Interestingly, the next and final farmer visited by the recruiting mission that day—up the mountain trail a bit further—received more of a favourable reaction for both his cacao and bananas and so would become a member of the cooperative then and there.

In short, the 'natural capital' (soil quality, drainage, etc) that largely determines the 'quality' of goods in alternative networks such as this one in Costa Rica is unequally distributed among poor farmers who are themselves socially and economically differentiated. Such inequality then helps to determine, in turn, the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion that define spaces of intention. There is a symmetry involved here: just as inequalities of wealth help determine who consumes eco-chic commodities, so too inequalities of wealth help decide who will produce goods of sufficient 'quality' to enter alternative networks. Such exclusionary practices are the norm. Thus, the head of a key fair trade certification agency in the North remarked that, 'this was indeed the way things worked' in a market-based approach (personal communication, 2003). Indeed, in recognition of the importance of 'quality' goods to the mainstreaming of fair trade, the Fairtrade Labelling Organisations International (FLO)—international housekeeper of fair trade standards and certification located in Bonn, Germany— has belatedly introduced a programme designed to boost production quality in marginal cooperatives.

There is, too, the question of the uneven playing field that producer cooperatives encounter as they struggle to make their mark in fair trade. Thus, the cooperatives involved in this market (particularly those in the coffee and chocolate industries) are not created equal. Many of the most successful cooperatives such as CONACADO in the Dominican Republic and Kuapa Kokoo in Ghana—both leaders in organic cacao production and export—have had substantial organizational support through early NGO involvement from GTZ and Twin Trading respectively. This is neither to detract from their success nor their immense efforts to make themselves commercially viable. It is also not to deny the invaluable support that these organisations provide to the livelihoods and welfare of members.

Rather, this is to recognize four characteristics of the yet further *bounded* nature of fair trade that amount to a powerful set of exclusionary practices[2]: (1) the fundamental importance of early technical and economic support from international NGOs that assists producer cooperatives to enter the market, often at the expense of other unassisted cooperatives; (2) the competitive state of the market means that new cooperatives find themselves at a strong disadvantage as late entrants to a field in which better established cooperatives dominate; (3) a de facto barrier to entry that requires each cooperative to pay a $3500 fee to FLO before it can be registered as a fair trade supplier – a fee that falls hardest on the poorest cooperatives; and (4) the fact that cooperatives must show evidence of a buyer for their products before they can be put on FLO's list of cooperatives – another administrative measure that sifts out the least well connected and/or business savvy. Thus, fierce competition as well as new pricing structures and access requirements erect entry barriers to these spaces of intention that cast doubt on the perception of these spaces as an unmitigated ethical 'good'.

Evidence drawn from Costa Rica, thus suggests a strong need *not* to take the claims —or indeed theorisations—made in the sustainable consumption sector at face value. Our point is not to dismiss either the material importance or ethical significance of this sector. Rather, it is to argue that critical analysis must explore the *actual* practices associated with

[2] For more on this, see Goodman et al (2012).

these spaces of intention by peopling them. Indeed, at a time when the harsh fluorescence of the capitalist market illuminates and seemingly moulds behaviour around the world to an unparalleled degree, such analysis is essential. Clearly, the possibilities of an ethics of care through consumption at-a-distance might be tempered by the bounded-ness evident in not only the standards and certification regimes that govern these products, but also in the penchant of neo-liberal influenced policies to use the 'invisible hand' of the market against the most vulnerable. This is not trivial: Gibson-Graham's (2006) 'diverse' or 'proliferative economies'—of which fair trade and organic production might be central in Southern contexts—work for some poor individuals and groups *but not for others*. This is no accident since there are particular historical and economic reasons for inclusion and exclusion, which may or may not (be seen to) be 'fair'. The 'spaces of hope' (Lawson, 2005) opened up by novel ethical/sustainable geographies of care need to meet the tastes and preferences of those 'gatekeepers' who mediate entry into new consumer markets for these spaces even to operate at all.

*Excluding the powerful in Mexico*

That spaces of intention are seen to represent new ways of doing things based on market-based 'alternative' practices is clear. Yet, as noted, work on sustainable consumption has begun to underscore the pitfalls of this approach to reforming global capitalism. One problem relates to the ambiguities and contradictions that occur as an effort is made to embed new spaces of intention in producing regions where the desperately poor are numerous, and existing ways of doing things based on powerful and highly inequitable local political economies are entrenched. Here, we take the example of a traditional product for which there appears to be an emerging global market – *chicle* or 'natural' chewing gum – and explore how efforts to link it to new sustainable production and trading arrangements on behalf of poor producers living in the high forests of the Yucatan peninsular in Mexico met with resistance from those who would be thereby excluded from this sector.

The creation of a space of intention around 'natural' chewing gum reflected a complex history ripe with political, economic and cultural meaning. The mass production of chewing gum was, until the 1950s, dominated by *chicle,* a latex-like substance extracted from the resin of the *Chicozapote* tree, found mainly in the tropical forests of Mexico and Guatemala (Redclift, 2004). Thereafter, chewing gum was produced synthetically – largely from hydrocarbons, derived from a form of vinyl. Its history as a 'natural' forest product appeared then to be over even as the ranks of forest producers began to dissipate. However, natural chicle is nowmaking a comeback. Indeed, it is attractive to Northern consumers wishing to combine a taste for gum with ethical support for fair trade and organic products.

Natural, *chicle*-based gum is thus now available on the Web, where the customer is told (in the case of the company Glee Gum) that it is "all natural chewing gum made from sustainably harvested rainforest chicle". Such gum also comes with Co-op America's Business Seal of Approval, which "helps consumers identify and support socially responsible companies that have been screened and approved by Co-op America". This seal of approval is designed to show customers that there is a firm commitment on the part of businesses, such as Glee Gum, to uphold the highest production standards.[3] The benefits of such commendation include listing in Co-op America's Green Business Pages, "the national honor roll of socially responsible companies". Companies are screened to establish their green credentials following which, if they are approved, they can advertise using the Co-op America logo.

[3] See http://www.coopamerica.org/cabn/about/sealofapproval.cfm

A similar product, 'Jungle Gum', is advertised on the Raintree website's online store whose products, it is there claimed, are "extensively documented, thoroughly researched and unconditionally guaranteed".[4] The consumer is invited into a veritable Aladdin's cave of ethical, sustainably sourced products, all of which come from tropical rainforest (Fedick, 2003). Material is presented on both sites about the history of the *chicleros* (or *chicle* tappers), who built empires for corporations such as Wrigley's and Thomas Adams in the early twentieth century – firms that grew fantastically wealthy by establishing chewing gum as an iconic, global product. However, the recent development of commercial *chicle* has a darker history than that presented on such websites, oriented as they are to sales to Northern consumers. This history supports our wider analysis of the ethical ambiguities and limits of sustainable consumption – and its (at times) quite tenuous links to a spatial politics of intention for producers.

The commercialisation of Mexican *chicle* became a key function of diverse federations of *chicle* cooperatives, the first of which was founded in Quintana Roo in 1937. These federations were strict hierarchies linked closely to the Mexican Sate; indeed, no sale could be made without authorisation from the Federation president. It was not until 1978 that the presidents of *chicle* cooperatives and federations were elected democratically. However, even this step did not end state intervention. Thus, the entire national production of *chicle* was sold through one export company – the *Impulsadora y Exportadora Nacional* (IMPEXNAL) – a branch of the *Banco Nacional de Comercio Exterior* (National Foreign Trade Bank). This monopoly was created through a government law, which exempted IMPEXNAL from paying export taxes. For the producers it was thus impossible to influence the prices that they were paid. As such, most revenue (and profit) was retained by IMPEXNAL.

The declining importance of *chicle* in the latter half of the twentieth century (when synthetic gums were dominant) led the Federal Government to lose interest in this sector providing thereby an opening for producers to seek a better deal for themselves. A case in point is the Union of Chicle Cooperatives that has sought to deal directly with manufacturers of chewing gum. Yet this goal has been difficult to attain as powerful interests fight exclusion from these sustainable consumption networks.

Thus, former managers of IMPEXNAL directed foreign buyers to a new company, Mexitrade, set up in the wake of the unravelling of IMPEXNAL. This new firm was also closely linked to the State. Not surprisingly, buyers were initially reluctant to buy from the Union, especially as former IMPEXNAL managers had strongly advised them to buy from Mexitrade. Such state-linked economic practice is common in Mexico (Banister, 2007)

The Union initially then had no choice but to sell to Mexitrade and accept their prices. Thus, although production of chicle varied markedly above and below an average of 395 tonnes per annum in the mid 1990s, the price that the Union received from Mexitrade changed little. Indeed, between 1999 and 2002, the price remained the same irrespective of international demand during that period. Frustrated by this situation, the Union of Chicle Cooperatives looked to bypass Mexitrade. There was some success here in 1998 when the Union completed direct negotiations with Wild Things (an organic chewing gum manufacturer from the US), as well as with Mitsuba (an intermediary that sells *chicle* on to Japanese manufacturers). Mexitrade's control over *chicle* began to slip.

However, powerful state-linked interests behind Mexitrade did not take kindly to this effort to thereby exclude them. The fight-back began almost immediately. This involved a campaign against the Union based on 'counter-exclusionary' practice: an enhanced

[4] See http://www.rain-tree.com/rtmprod.htm

bureaucratic burden for producers working through the Union and strong financial incentives for individuals who defected from the Union scheme through illegal smuggling of *chicle*.

Opponents of the Union took advantage of the thick layers of bureaucratic red tape that were still involved in any effort to export goods – and, above all, their strong connections to those in government who controlled this process – to stymie Union deals. Indeed, there are an array of regulations and export licenses that have to be dealt with before legal shipping of *chicle* can proceed. These include: an authorisation of forest exploitation, a shipment authorisation from the Federal Government, State Government authorisation, authorisation to transport dried resin to storage houses, and even Federal Government requirements concerning 're-shipment' of merchandise previously stored. In addition, there must be a report of transaction each time any part of a previously authorised quantity of chewing gum is shipped (all *chicle* is not usually transported at once).

To complicate things further, these procedures cannot be tackled directly by the Union or individual cooperatives. Instead, they are undertaken indirectly through the *comisario ejidal* (administrative authority of communal lands) that manages land on behalf of local communities. This arrangement reflects legislation on forest management that specifies that all *chicleros* in cooperatives must also be members of an *ejido*.[5] The *chicozapote* trees, from which *chicle* is tapped, are mainly located in *ejidal* forests, which are communally owned and managed by this *ejidal* authority. In keeping with these regulations, therefore, forest inspectors must go to the *ejido* to verify information contained in a report each time that a document is handed in to this authority.

These bureaucratic procedures are difficult to meet at the best of times. However, when powerful groups linked to Mexitrade worked behind the scenes to drag out the process even further, then the capacity of the Union to make contracts and export *chicle* was diminished. During 2002-2003, for example, the Union could not meet new export orders received in relation to the Korean market. When Union managers explained the convoluted procedures that they had to follow in order to win official approval for exports to their Korean counterparts, the latter thought it impossible that a government could act so plainly against the interests of its own exporters and hence accused the Union of commercial misconduct. The matter was eventually resolved. Yet this experience forced the Union to change marketing strategy. Given the administrative measures that it needed to fulfil, Union managers calculated that they could not accept orders for *chicle* beyond 900 tonnes a year – even though they could produce 2,000 tonnes per year.

High transaction costs associated with these measures only exacerbated Union woes. These costs include funds for a technical study of forest resources, stamp duty, fees for forest exploitation and the transport permit fee. Then there are the regular operational costs of the cooperatives which include contributions to member retirement funds as well as to the hospitalisation and sickness fund through which *chicleros* access health services. Such costs are yet another burden that enhances the cost of Union *chicle* – leaving them vulnerable in turn to attack.

The counter-exclusionary campaign has thus encompassed illegal smuggling of *chicle* (known as *coyotaje*) in a move designed to undermine the Union's legal export programme. This is a grave matter. Indeed, Union representatives (former *chicleros*) who liaise with the rank and file identify *coyotaje* as the biggest single threat to the Union. At the heart of this process are *coyotes* – individuals who tempt *chicleros* with a price superior to that offered by cooperatives. *Coyotes* can do so as they do not pay the routine costs that cooperatives incur and also smuggle *chicle* to Chetumal, on the border with Belize.

[5] The *ejido* is the community land unit which provides usufruct rights (not title) to farmers. It was an outcome of the 1910 Revolution, but the *ejido* has been undermined, especially since 1992, as land and natural resources are effectively privatised.

The smugglers found a ready ally in the disgruntled groups linked to Mexitrade. The latter would buy *chicle* from *coyotes* in Chetumal through intermediaries such as PFSCA (Forest Products of Southeast Mexico and Central America). PFSCA is mainly dedicated to the commercialisation of hardwoods, but dabbles too with Non-Traditional Forest Products (NTFPs). This move reflected worsening relations between Mexitrade and the Union, especially after a fraught 1998-1999 season. Following the Asian crisis of the late 1990s, the purchase of natural gum from there dried up – a major blow since Asia was the largest market for Mexican *chicle*. Mexitrade, which had just bought *chicle* from the Union, but then found could not sell it in Asia, refused to pay for that order. The Union took Mexitrade to court over the matter and in response the latter refused to buy from the former, opting to work with PFSCA instead. Both c*oyotes* and Mexitrade benefited from this illegal trade even as the original exclusionary practices of the Union backfired.

Yet the Union too has fought back. Thus, it slowly re-built its export links. It courted former business partners seeking to respond to their shifting requirements while working to improve delivery reliability. It also addressed the demand of firms (especially in Japan) for better 'quality' via new processing techniques. Contracts followed with firms in Japan, Indonesia, Korea, and Italy. Meanwhile, efforts by the Union and affiliated cooperatives to woo back individual producers from the smugglers are paying off. Indeed, no *chicleros* have been forced to sell to *coyotes* recently (even if the threat of smuggling persists).

The effort by the Union of Chicle Cooperatives and its allies to control the production and export of *chicle* is small scale. Yet this effort is revealing in that it illustrates once again the important if complex role of boundaries in creating spaces of intention for sustainable consumption. In this case, the exclusion of powerful groups linked to the production and export business in Mexico achieved mixed results, in part due to the 'counter-exclusionary' measures pursued by those excluded by the Union. While it seems that the Union has been able to out compete its opponents, at least for now, this situation could well change in the future as market conditions change and/or local opponents devise new ways to tap into the hopeful spaces that the Union seeks to embed in Mexico's traditionally unequal political economy. Exclusion—and exclusion—as with much else in these spaces of intention, is always a contingent phenomenon.

*Excluding the 'common' consumer in Malaysia*

The creation of spaces of intention in which like-minded producers and consumers come together in the context of sustainable consumption suggests a unity of purpose that may not exist in practice. While producers are in the business of maximising livelihoods, the role of consumers is far from clear – especially as alternative consumption practices appear in non-Northern countries. Critical work documents the sometimes ambiguous personal reasoning that informs the consumption choices of individuals in the North (e.g. Seyfang, 2005). We pursue this critique further here by considering the possible relationship between the erection of barriers around spaces of intention and the slippery nature of middle class consumer intention. We do so with a Malaysian example – a prospering Southern country where alternative consumption is only now beginning to make its mark.

In rapidly developing Malaysia (as in a number of other countries in the South), a prospering middle class is beginning to translate *inter-linked* concerns about environmental degradation, healthy living and general social well-being into a set of 'alternative' practices linked to sustainable consumption (Hobson, 2004). An entire industry is gearing up to cater to these concerns drawing a new group of consumers into the 'alternative' fold. Yet it is not clear that the intentions of this group are a mirror image of 'liberal' intentions (however complex and ambiguous) often espoused in North America. The social and environmental circumstances under which Southern consumers (as in Malaysia) resort to sustainable

consumption usually differ from conditions that existed when such consumption was pioneered in the North.

The rise of 'alternative' sustainable consumption in Malaysia as a middle-class phenomenon is recent and still limited when compared (for instance) with neighbouring Singapore.[6] Most of that growth has occurred since 2000. Typically, it is a practice that is most noticeable in urban areas, especially in the two biggest cities – Kuala Lumpur and George Town – located on the more developed and populous west coast of peninsular Malaysia. In George Town (a city of 400,000 inhabitants located on Penang Island), there were thus some half dozen small organic shops in operation with most of them having opened their doors only several years ago. These were pioneering outfits – local supermarkets had yet to tap into the organic trend as has happened in the more 'mature' markets of the North. Further, the décor and products were entirely pitched towards a middle-class clientele in one of Asia's 'most liveable' cities.

In the case of the Green Organics Mart, for example, the focus was on organic consumption as a source of healthy living with an array of expensive foodstuffs (e.g. coffee, tea, bread, juice, fresh fruit and vegetables) and health care products (including supplements) on offer. Products were sourced mainly from Kuala Lumpur with many originating in the USA and Australia. There was, too, an assortment of reading materials on 'personal well-being' to hand for the discerning customer. Its location in a North American-style shopping complex in a relatively affluent area completed this picture of a middle class refuge. Organic shops such as Green Organics Mart form part of a wider pattern of middle-class concern emerging over wasteful and unhealthy consumption. Thus, to take another key activity in the sustainable consumption sector, recycling centres supported by local government and residents' associations have become more common in Malaysia since the turn of the millennium. Here, again, middle-class consumers are at the forefront, as people become more environmentally aware (for one survey, see Haron *et al*., 2005). Thus, for example, office manager Teoh Hooi Lee was reported in one local newspaper as driving over to her local recycling centre (in Petaling Jaya in Selangor State) "with her 4-wheel drive full of recyclable materials" – as she proudly put it: "It's been a routine for me every end of the month, bringing recyclable materials to the centre. I wash everything first, and sort everything out, although they don't ask us to" (Koay, 2005: 2). Such fastidious behaviour on the part of Malaysia's 'new model citizenry' stands in sharp contrast to a still all-too-widespread 'throw away' culture in the country. Thus, for example, when recycling bins were first introduced in George Town's Botanical Gardens, visitors simply used them as general rubbish receptacles. To the despair of activists, this sort of practice is common, earning the city the title '*Pulau Pinang Darul Sampah'* [Penang, Land of Rubbish] – a shocking indictment for a city famed for its beautiful beaches and known as the 'Pearl' [*Mutiara*] of Malaysia (Loh, 2005). Here, alternative shopping is tantamount to a 'detox' politics that cleanses the nation's environmental behaviour through the example of personal cleansing. Meanwhile, the Malaysian government is showing interest in 'alternative' sustainable consumption. Speaking at the 4th Malaysian Exhibition on Organic and Natural Products held in Kuala Lumpur, one Department of Agriculture official noted that organic farming was still in its infancy in the country with but 900 hectares planted. Hence, it needed to import organic food to satisfy growing demand. To meet this demand, and to enable the country to even become a net exporter of organic food, the government set out ambitious growth targets for the sector (Ramli, 2005). Concurrently, the government is pushing the message that "ethical

[6] Such consumption is not be confused with practices linked to a 'radical' social movement led by Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) and Sahabat Alam Malaysia. This movement has long addressed sustainable consumption but links it to a wider anti-capitalist campaign (see www.en.cap.org.my).

traders get more customers" through adverts in national newspapers that promote a new 'ethical' outlook.

These sorts of private and public practices – still small in scale but growing – bespeak a broader shift in Malaysian society that is conditioning how social identity and activism takes place. Two things stand out. First, alternative sustainable consumption there suggests the advent of a market-driven kind of 'detox' politics, that seeks to cleanse the consumer of actions that are harmful to the environment, that is *somewhat* reminiscent of countries in the North (and the USA and UK notably). There is a parallel emphasis too, now, in Malaysia on human-induced environmental crises at the local and global scales fed by extensive media coverage that seems to associate public anxiety with environmental problems, a possible complement to 'alternative' consumption everywhere. During one of the hottest summers on record (2005), for instance, the newspapers were full of articles on global warming and related environmental catastrophes (such as the widespread haze caused by fires in nearby Indonesia) as well as the way in which Malaysia's growing ecological footprint was adding to the problem (e.g. Ooi, 2005). The message was clear: Malaysians needed to 'do something' as they had become, in the words of one fisherman, '*mahluk perosak'* [destructive creatures] who behaved "without any thought to the consequences" (cited in Sabaratnam, 2005: 3).

Yet uptake of this kind of intentional politics also fits well with Malaysian history. Thus, the country has been governed since the inter-ethnic riots (pitting Malays against Chinese) of 1969 by a Malay-led political coalition that has sought to regulate political, economic and cultural practices in order to ensure 'peaceful and harmonious' relations. Notable here is the New Economic Policy (NEP) that promoted the advancement of the more numerous, but traditionally poorer, Malays in relation to the less numerous but richer Chinese. To some extent, the NEP enabled the emergence of a sizable Malay middle class, ensuring thereby relative political stability as the country pursued its own distinctive brand of Asian capitalism (Talib, 2001).

The country did experience once more a confrontational style of politics in the 1980s and 1990s as the environmental implications of state-sanctioned accelerated development (itself linked to the NEP) became apparent. Notably involving activists working for NGOs such as Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) and the Consumers Association of Penang (CAP), a social movement directly challenged the environmental record of the government of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (Hong, 1987). This challenge covered everything from rapid deforestation (and associated oppression of indigenous people) to polluting industrial development. The result, in a country where the political economy is predicated on accelerated development, was a severe crackdown: activists were imprisoned or gagged while surveillance of unpatriotic 'foreign-linked' NGOs intensified (Eccleston, 1996). Clearly, activism that confronted the (unsustainable) economic activities of Malaysia's political and economic elites was unwelcome (Jomo *et al*., 2004; Doolittle, 2005). Such activism did not disappear but was more circumspect in its challenge to official practices. Social space was thereby created for non-confrontational politics more to the liking of Malaysia's leaders as well as its affluent consumers.

An awakening interest in 'alternative' sustainable consumption also fits with the desire of Malaysia's increasingly powerful middle classes to stand out from the crowd. Here, the wish for 'distinction' (Bourdieu, 1984) is compelling. Indeed, it is perhaps even more acute in a rapidly developing society such as Malaysia than in the more economically developed North, if only because of greater proximity for many citizens (including many nouveau riche) to a recent poverty stricken past. We must tread carefully here – consumption can mean different things to different people and is often conditioned itself by wider religious and cultural debates (Chua, 2001). In contemporary Malaysia, for example, a complex and

multifaceted debate is under way over the role of Western consumption practices and influence in a modern Islamic state.

Shopping in an expensive organic shop (modelled on outlets in the North) seems in many respects akin to shopping in the globally connected mainstream sector (e.g. Gap, Armani). It might suggest a strong desire to imbibe globally powerful signifiers (associated with a 'healthy' and affluent lifestyle) that help, in turn, to separate out globally connected middle class consumers from their less privileged brethren. For this kind of 'alternative' consumer, even the retail setting needs to be perfectly controlled – consider, for instance, the reaction of "stay-at-home and work-at-home mum" Doris Chua, a 30-something 'event director' and Kuala Lumpur resident, to the opening of an organic shop in her area:

> I am an organic food advocate and have been rather blessed to have access to many organic shops around my area. One of my favourite is JustLife which often captivate me with their freestyle graphics, creative food labels and marketing concept. Most importantly, I like to buy fresh vegetables and fruits from the shops as they are carefully selected and freshness is guaranteed. JustLife has recently opened its flagship store in Ikano Power Centre, Kuala Lumpur with a sit down café serving organic food. There is a wider selection of fruits and vegetables in the long storage place which resembles very much like the ones you see in supermarkets. I am very impressed by their interiors and décor, which is nicely designed – kudos to the design team at JustLife. The root vegetables are placed in wooden baskets like the ones in the market … a nice touch to getting close to nature.[7]

This passage of one devotee is interesting on several grounds. First, there is an emphasis on presentation and style as Doris is 'captivated' by the concept and layout of JustLife – thereby underlining that this shop is about much more than simply being a purveyor of fine organic food. Thus, she compliments the 'creative' and 'nicely designed' shop – a retail space packed with intentions. The 'just life' is also a 'stylish' life fit for 21st century middle-class Malaysian consumers. Second, there is a nod to a more traditional way of shopping – the wet (or farmer's) market. These markets, once ubiquitous in the country, have long been the meeting place of producers and consumers of sometimes quite different ethnic and class backgrounds. However in modern Malaysia, there is seemingly less room for such mixing in the marketplace as the prospering middle classes retreat to clean and modern supermarkets as well as to speciality upmarket organic shops. In the latter, selective admiration for a rapidly receding past nonetheless becomes a symbolic part of the décor as wooden baskets 'like the ones in the market' hold root vegetables. Doris carefully notes this 'nice touch' and goes on to suggest it brings the shopper 'closer to nature' – or, more precisely, the producers who are seemingly nature's stand-in within this narrative.

In the process, though, 'alternative' consumption is turned inside out: where once it might have been seen to be a marker of *political* distinction, it has seemingly now become just another marker of *social and economic* distinction for status hungry middle class consumers. Here, then, spaces of intention acquire new meaning. As sustainable consumption practices and rituals derived notably from the North are often mimicked, new borders are created that reflect and demarcate the shifting new realities of social inequality and class in Malaysia. In the process, exclusion is not an accident – it is probably partly intentional. In an ironic twist on what was noted earlier about poor marginal producers, here the espousal of environmental causes through consumption is itself a prime means by which to boost one's standing in society.

[7] http://dorischua.blogspot.com/2007/05.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has explored some of the ethical ambiguities and limits to the burgeoning sustainable consumption sector of eco-chic. Our focus was on the under-studied, yet crucial, issue of border making – something that is inevitably involved in the creation of the distinctive 'spaces of intention' that define this sector. Such border making is ongoing, as new aims, people and knowledge come to the fore often challenging prior ways of seeing and doing. There is much that is positive here. A politics of sustainable consumption would seem to imply a politics of border marking so that battle-lines can be clearly drawn across the market place. How else would consumers know how to make ethical choices? Yet we also saw a darker side: creating bordered spaces of intention inevitably raises the issue of *which* people and knowledge are included and excluded.

Certainly, exclusionary practices associated with the creation of spaces of intention form part of a broader politics and geography of care. Thus, and as our Mexican example illustrated, the quest by producer cooperatives to boost their role in the space of intention surrounding *chicle* involved them in crafting a new production-cum-export regime. However, this entailed a fierce battle with powerful groups thereby excluded who were primary beneficiaries of the prior regime. Indeed, they even mounted a counter-exclusionary campaign designed to frustrate this instance of hopeful border marking. This campaign is ongoing and is a sobering reminder of the 'weapons of the strong' that can stymie change in the 'alternative' sustainable consumption sector.

Exclusionary practices sometimes also end up excluding some of the poorest and most marginal producers from that sector. Here, exclusion reflects the unintended yet hardly neutral consequence of the quest for 'quality' by consumers. To take our example of Costa Rican cacao production, quality requires that production there take place on land with good 'natural capital' (e.g. organically rich well drained soils) – yet, such land is typically beyond the reach of the poorest farmers. Here, then, 'quality' serves as a means by which the poorest producers are excluded – just as poorer consumers at the other end of the network also tend to be weeded out as 'quality' products fetch premium prices beyond their ability to pay.

Indeed, as the Malaysian example revealed, the question of borders delimiting spaces of intention concerning 'alternative' sustainable consumption can simultaneously raise the issue of class distinction. This is especially so among the *nouveau riche* who hunger for cultural and economic markers to 'place' themselves in a rapidly changing world. In this sense, 'quality' and 'ethically good' behaviour come to signify not so much a politics of contestation against the status quo, as a self-conscious consumption politics that might promote the self in a 'hip' or 'fashionable' manner while being supportive of that status quo.

We are clearly sceptical about the merits and utility of *some* aspects of eco-chic and the market-driven politics that it reflects and reinforces. True, there are areas of hope – for instance, inasmuch as elites who have long preyed on poor producers are excluded from new spaces of intention (as is partly the case in the Mexican example). Further, some unintended exclusions – as with the poorest producers who cannot produce 'quality' goods – are changing over time as others in the network (such as Northern NGOs) seek to redress injustice through assistance to such individuals.

Yet all of the ethical ambiguities and limits surrounding the sustainable consumption sector cannot be eliminated so readily. Insofar as some issues reflect structural problems with the entire approach and philosophy of the sector, such tinkering (however commendable individual outcomes might be) will fail. This raises in turn a series of issues about the direction and *raison d'etre* of this 'alternative' to the status quo.

The first issue is the precarious and contingent nature of the ability to exclude people and knowledge from the spaces of intention that surround the sustainable consumption sector.

Because that sector is embedded in the wider capitalist system, there is always the strong possibility that those who are intentionally excluded (such as 'greedy' elites and brokers who enjoy 'excess' profits) will simply resort to mainstream economic channels in order to undercut that sector. Certification schemes are designed to prevent this process. Yet, much depends on the nature of the product and its transparency in the network since some products are more readily monitored than others in the journey from producer to consumer. The more complex the journey in terms of such things as product transformation and/or the number of intermediary actors involved, the more likely it may be that good intentions to help poorer producers are frustrated along the way.

There is also the problem of the voluntary nature of consumer intentions that underpin sustainable consumption. This sector is embedded in a wider economy that is premised on – and 'disciplines' consumers in the art of ephemeral consumption choices. While the 'alternative' sector may not seek to encourage ephemeral consumer decision-making, there is a steep gradient here, given the discursive and material power of capitalism. There are no guarantees that 'alternative' consumers might not switch products in search of new experiences – especially where they desire a 'distinctive' identity. Yet the livelihoods of producers are not ephemeral – leaving them vulnerable to the whims of consumers who may be 'caring' but not 'careful' in their choices.

Thirdly, 'alternative' sustainable consumption is vulnerable to subversion by elites attracted to a sector that is 'sexy' – a fashionable marker of status rather than a political statement of protest. Such motivation makes a mockery of the underlying ethos of the sector even as it ensures that it never fulfils its (theoretically) challenging initial premise. Yet how does one exclude elites who are 'inauthentic' consumers? Indeed, what does 'authentic' consumer mean? This is probably an impossible endeavour yet it matters precisely because, ultimately, the future of sustainable consumption is based on affinity of purpose (and not simply outcome). To see it otherwise is to reduce the sector to a 'plaything' of those who wish no alteration to the status quo.

Finally, the ethical ambiguity of this sector is deepened when its role as a means to sustain a status quo based on great inequalities of wealth is considered. To what extent does the sustainable consumption sector serve a key function today in disciplining people to work within a system that is always likely to be based on inequality? A bit like the Keynesian welfare state of old (albeit without the more systematic redistribution of wealth and 'universal' welfare support that were hallmarks of that system), this sector persuades (some) people that capitalism is not 'bad' after all – it is worthy and capable of reform. Can an alternative politics thus ever be truly 'alternative'? Indeed, it may simply divert energy from more radical initiatives.

Thus, hope residing in spaces of intention linked to sustainable consumption and eco-chic may be somewhat misplaced. If people's intentions are often ambiguous, then a politics based on the consumption choices of 'winners' in the global economy that does not simultaneously address structural inequalities that sustain the privileged position of these consumers, seems doomed from the start. As such, those desiring a hopeful politics based on 'alternative' market-based exchange need to look beyond the bottom of a (fairly traded coffee) cup or the green consumer emporium that trades on elite food and fashion.

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