Commentary

The politics of behaviour change
How to make people act ethically (without them knowing it)

The papers collected in this theme issue challenge the received terms of criticism through which academic analysis frames contemporary examples of alternative economic experiments, such as alternative food networks, fair trade practices, slow food movements, and product certification schemes. Insofar as these sorts of practices seek to use market mechanisms for the pursuit of a wide variety of 'ethical' objectives, one line of criticism reproduces an-all-or-nothing style of neo-Marxist critique, presenting these sorts of activities as wholly complicit with capacious, hegemonic 'neoliberalism'. Above all, it is the centrality accorded to consumer agency that raises the ire of left-leaning critics, who see in the rise of so-called 'ethical consumption' nothing more than the latest ruses of generalized commodity fetishism (eg Carrier, 2010). There is also a much more sympathetic style of critical analysis, derived primarily from political science and political sociology, of what is sometimes called 'political consumerism'. Micheletti (2003, page 2) defines political consumerism as "actions by people who make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices." In largely accepting the idea of a consumer-driven phenomenon based on the assertive exercise of choice in the market, the concept of political consumerism tends to mirror back in a positive light the argument that the rise of consumerist forms of 'ethical' action is really only a symptom of a lamentable decline and disenchantment from proper democratic politics. This conceptualization continues to present the politicization of consumption as necessarily involving a form of consumer-driven politics (cf Trentmann, 2006).

So, while the concept of political consumerism is helpful in bringing into view the political dimensions of various alternative market practices, it still keeps the analytical and critical attention focused squarely on notions of consumer agency. There is, however, a move to rethink political consumerism as an effect of the framing and mobilization strategies of organizations, rather than as an expression of the dynamics of individualization expressed through the mediums of consumer choice (see Jacobsen and Dulsrud, 2007). The papers in this theme issue contribute to the double displacement underway in understandings of the contemporary politicization of consumption: away from the focus on the agency of the consumer in the act of shopping, towards a focus on organized assemblages of agency; and towards an understanding of the dynamics of consumption as embedded in everyday practices of social reproduction. There are three overlapping themes running across these papers which, taken as a whole, reconfigure the terms of critical analysis through which the contemporary politics of food might be addressed. The first theme is the importance of collective infrastructures of provisioning in shaping and reshaping patterns of food consumption around different values; this is most evident in Little, Maye, and Ilbery's (2010) discussion of hitherto neglected possibilities of collective purchasing by consumer buying groups, in Morgan's (2010) discussion of the politics of school food reform, and Lang's (2010) account of the politics of 'omnistandards' in European food policy. This first theme challenges the simple framing of 'the individual' faced with choices about which product to select. In so doing, it links to the second common theme, which is a shared challenge to the spatial imaginary of so much writing, and campaigning, about alternative

food practices. This spatial imaginary revolves around the image of 'connection', in which it is supposed that it is possible to reconstruct the chain of causal relationships between the consumer, through various mediating links in supply chains, through to the producer.

The image of connections along a chain is, of course, central to a great deal of campaigning around 'global' issues, but it is also taken for granted in a great deal of critical academic analysis. In both cases it is assumed that exposing to view the strictly functional interdependencies into which people are implicated will have some sort of motivating force on them to change their conduct in suitably 'responsible' ways. This gives rise to the dominant aesthetic of contemporary 'global' campaigning around issues of food, climate change, trade justice, humanitarian disaster, and environmental futures, dubbed the 'sweatshop sublime' by Robbins (2002), in which access to ever-proliferating information about the infinitely demanding responsibilities to which people must respond generates a sense of powerlessness to act on those responsibilities. The same linear imaginary of the chain is central to evaluations of fair and ethical trade initiatives, in which the impacts of the growth of fair trade markets are assessed in terms of their outcomes for producer communities. Neilson and Pritchard's (2010) reconceptualization of the 'horizontal' relationships and 'wider eddies' which fair and ethical trade create in regionalized complexes of food production is therefore an important and timely challenge to what they call the 'vertical' spatial imaginary in which so much analysis of these practices remains trapped. The challenge they present brings into view another feature of the papers in this theme issue, each of which indicates the close proximity between academic analysis and practitioner discourses in the politics of alternative food. In this respect, Morgan's discussion of the ongoing negotiation of the complex, conflicting meanings of 'local' and 'global' amongst organic and fair trade food organizations is notable for reminding us that debates about spatial concepts can have very real consequences for the success of political campaigns; his discussion also reminds us that the debates amongst practitioners might well be in advance of academic understandings.

The idea that it might be useful to look at how new concepts are developed in these sorts of political fields brings us to the third theme running throughout the issue, which is the sense that the values involved in the politics of food are multiple, complex, and often in conflict. Morgan articulates this view most clearly, indicating the hard work involved in drawing together different aims and agendas emerging from different strands of alternative food politics. Lang pursues the same theme in tracking the attempts to generate 'omnistandards' at the level of European food policy with the aim of overcoming the information overload that follows from multiple certification standards.

Each of these three themes—of the collective dimensions of alternative food politics, of the reimagination of the spatialities of alternative food, and of the contested nature of 'food ethics' —is at the centre of the ongoing development and mutation of what Pollan (2010) has identified as 'the food movement'. The papers in this issue draw into view different aspects of each of these themes, but each does so by staying close to the ground, tracking the ongoing development of this movement from within, as it were, remaining attentive to the concerns and interests and contradictions and identities that have to be squared, reconciled, and placated to achieve any progress in such a complex field of action. But there is one issue in particular which these papers draw into view without, understandably perhaps given the remit of the theme issue, fully drawing out. What happens to the very idea of 'ethics' when the values around which alternative food politics is mobilized become embedded upstream from sites of individual consumer agency? This is not an issue unique to the field of food, certainly;

in debates about climate change and environmental issues, the idea that ethical values can and should be embedded in practices, technologies, and infrastructures is well developed (eg Hobson, 2006). This question takes us beyond the common-enough thought that there are different ethical values, even different modes of ethicality, involved in alternative food or sustainable practices. Neilson and Pritchard's analysis and that of Lang certainly acknowledge the complexity of motivations and desires involved in ethical food initiatives—a splash of deontology here, a dash of consequentialism, and large helpings of virtue. Once understood politically, as organized practices of mobilization, compromise, conflict, and negotiation, the 'ethics' of alternative food emerges as distributed across a whole complex of discrete actions, technical systems, discursive orders, and reflexive practices. But just what happens to 'ethics', understood as a first-person modality of acting normatively, when agency is distributed in this way? If the politics of alternative food initiatives, like other fields of the politicization of consumption, is increasingly shaped by widely shared understandings of the importance of embedding values in background infrastructures, so that ethical objectives can be best achieved by circumventing or circumscribing the choices available to individuals, doesn't this imply the elision of ethics as a reflexive practice of responding to the imperative 'what ought I do?'? It is one thing to observe that people engage in ethical food practices for a wide variety of reasons; quite another that people might be enrolled into such practices without really knowing it, for no reason at all, by inscribing ethical values into the objectivities of provisioning systems and supply chains. Or, to put it another way, can ethical *behaviour* be considered properly ethical if it is *mere behaviour*?

What are the politics of 'behaviour change'?
The papers in this theme issue on the politics of ethical food practices address a distinctive strand of the contemporary ethical problematization of consumption (see Barnett et al, 2010). In this strand, embedding ethical values in collective practices and infrastructures is combined with an emphasis on publicity and participation, thereby enrolling people as individuals in shared practices of responsibility without straightforwardly reproducing the hegemony of individualised consumer agency (see Micheletti and Follesdal, 2007). However, there is a second strand of ethical problematization of consumption, which is dominant across a number of policy fields. In this strand, changing patterns of consumption to achieve various 'public' outcomes has increasingly come to revolve around the theme of 'behaviour change'. Behaviour change has become a shared problematic across a series of fields of contemporary governance: in agendas addressing public health issues such as obesity, smoking, and alcohol use; in development fields concerned with changing sexual practices in the context of the HIV and AIDS pandemic; in agendas around environmental sustainability and climate change; and in agendas focused on transforming patterns of energy use.

The rise of 'behaviour change' as an object of policy intervention marks a distinctive shift from previously dominant information-led strategies (see Jackson, 2004). For two decades and often led by sustainability agendas, the problematization of consumption has focused on the assumption that the way to bring about change in consumption practices is by changing attitudes of rational consumers. Increasingly, as this assumption has run aground on the stubborn inertia of the practices in which so much consumption is embedded, so the idea that changing behaviour is the key has grown in popularity amongst communities of experts. The first of these approaches, focused on changing attitudes, at least purports to respect the expressed preferences of ordinary people, understood in their function as consumers, and to trust in their willingness and

capacity to do the right thing. The second approach is marked by a mounting cynicism on both these counts, and seeks to find ways around people's preferences, opinions, and desires in order to make them do the right thing despite themselves.

The rise of 'behaviour change' as a problem of policy and governance is therefore deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, it marks at least a partial acknowledgement of the degree to which consumption is always a social, collective activity, rather than a matter of disembedded consumer sovereignty. Theories of practice developed by sociologists of consumption and sociologists of science and technology are now acknowledged as providing important resources for understanding the inertia of 'public attitudes' towards environmental issues and climate change (eg Upham et al, 2009; see also http://www.projectcharm.info/). However, at a more general level, the translation of 'behaviour change' across a number of fields might mark a significant transformation in the contours of the public sphere in and through which collective practices of provisioning are problematized as potential objects of legitimate concerted action. In discussions of climate change all the way through to discussions of obesity, the patterns and rhythms of technological infrastructures, design architectures, and urban built environments are increasingly identified in technocratic–administrative discourses as generating various problems requiring concerted policy interventions. In these fields, people are identified as being detrimentally affected by patterns of everyday living in ways that escape their own volition or cognition, generating aggregate outcomes that require the reconfiguration of soft and hard infrastructures. This problematization of the backgrounds of consumption activities is associated with the reconfiguration of infrastructures around various anticipatory logics: for example, in programmes of urban resilience or urban ecological security. In these types of policy interventions, the route of public formation which passes from being causally affected by processes, through recognising this and then acting upon this recognition is short circuited in the name expert interventions made by 'choice architects' of various sorts, who act in the name of public health, well-being, public order, or happiness, making interventions which depend increasingly on 'viral' technologies of aggregation such as social marketing or urban design (for further discussion of the rise of so-called 'soft paternalism', see http://governingtemptation.wordpress.com/).

The problematization of behaviour change therefore marks a significant departure from policy making premised on the assumption that consumer choices in markets are equivalent to democratically expressed preferences that need necessarily to be respected. The proliferation of the vocabulary of 'behaviour change' indicates an ongoing debate about the scope of 'permissible paternalism' around which governance can be justified (Goodin, 2003, pages 50–57). What lies behind the discussions of 'choice sets' and 'choice architects' is the claim that market choices are not necessarily a means of expressing preferences that deserve democratic respect at all. Implicit in the discourse of behaviour change is an arrogation of voice by specific paternalistic experts (not least, certain strains of social science). The justification for paternalistically preferring some form of substituted judgment for the expressed preferences of ordinary people revolves around the analogy of addiction. It is noteworthy in this respect just how much of the debate about responsible, sustainable, and ethical consumption invokes a rhetoric of consumers being 'locked in' and 'addicted' to existing practices, an attribution which challenges narrow concepts of choice, information, and preferences.

The 'behaviouralist' problematization of infrastructures, practices, and technologies therefore raises questions about the potential dedemocratization of definitions of the public good. However, it is possible to find examples in which this same style of 'viral' thinking is configured in more creative, participatory ways. For example, there is a family of experimental political forms which are configuring urban space as an agent

of political transformation in response to paradigmatically 'global' problems: to adjust to impending 'peak-oil' crises and adopt 'low-carbon' practices in the case of the Transition Towns movement; to contribute to trade justice campaigns in the case of the Fair Trade Cities movement; or to develop alternative cultures of consumption in the case of the Slow Cities movement. In all three cases the built form of towns and cities, understood as the material configuration of infrastructures which sustain specific practices, is identified as a key medium of behaviour change; but this attribution is not achieved behind people's backs, but by configuring the everyday spaces of urban life, leisure, and work as communicative spaces of public education and mobilization.

The politics of food is, therefore, at the forefront of current debates about the significance of the various forms of 'mundane governance' embedded as the backgrounds of individual activity in infrastructures of contemporary living. It is easy enough to adopt a default academic posture of criticism in which one demands that these backgrounds should be brought into the open, so that we might better deliberate over whether the forms of direction which configure our everyday lives amount to anything approaching domination. But before we do so, we might do well to notice how the trajectories of policy problematization analyzed in detail in the papers of this theme issue bring into view the difficult relationship between two very different senses of what 'ethics' is actually about: the practice-based view of consumption supports the idea that ethics is a habitual form of embodied disposition towards emerging situations; it seems at odds, potentially at least, with a more obvious sense of ethics as the conscious reflection on values, means, and ends. These two views are not necessarily incompatible, but nor are they open to easy resolution. The case of the contemporary politics of ethical food is important precisely because it is a field in which the relationship between these different senses of ethics are being renegotiated in sometimes troubling, sometime surprising, ways.

Initiatives around ethical food, sustainable consumption, climate change policy, global trade justice, and related policy and activist fields provide interesting cases of the working through of the relationship between respecting individual freedoms of preference formation and the pursuit of individual life projects on the one hand, and justifying interventions that aim to shape tastes and bind choice in the interests of values of solidarity, autonomy, welfare, and justice on the other. This is a recurrent problem of democratic theory, and the papers in this theme issue show it being addressed in practical ways. The most interesting activist variants of working through this relationship move beyond paternalist models of politics as a field of intervention, and develop innovative forms of participatory practice. They might, in fact, be rather ahead of academic understandings of how habits and reasons go together, insofar as they seem to understand that the contemporary politicization of consumption is about articulating background, problematizing practices, and giving reasons all at the same time. In these fields of campaigning one finds practical models of how to articulate the imperatives of the two different senses of ethics noted above—of respecting people as competent moral agents while acknowledging the web of dependent and determinative relationships into which they are woven.

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