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## Problematizing Choice: Responsible consumers and sceptical citizens

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#### How to cite:

Malpass, A.; Barnett, C.; Clarke, N. and Cloke, P. (2007). Problematizing Choice: Responsible consumers and sceptical citizens. In: Bevir, Mark and Trentmann, Frank eds. *Governance, Consumers and Citizens: Agency and Resistance in Contemporary Politics*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 231–256.

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Version: [not recorded]

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

[http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1057/9780230591363\\_10](http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1057/9780230591363_10)

<http://www.palgrave.com/products/title.aspx?PID=278389>

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**Problematizing choice:  
Responsible consumers and sceptical citizens**

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Forthcoming in Mark Bevir and Frank Trentmann (eds.), *Governance and Consumption*, Palgrave.

*John*: 'Everyone says they were happy 20 years ago'.

*Karen*: 'I think in some ways though life was just simpler. I think all this choice and stuff...'

*Arun*: '...has just complicated things'.<sup>1</sup>

### **1). The proliferation of choice**

'Choice' has become a keyword in public policy debate in the United Kingdom, perhaps even 'the mantra of health, education and pension provision'.<sup>2</sup> This coincides with the emergence of 'the consumer' as the privileged figure of policy discourse. The assumption underlying this proliferation of choice in policy discourse is that consumerism has transformed people's expectations, so that public services must now be restructured in line with the demands of citizen-consumers who demand efficiency, responsiveness, choice and flexibility. The ubiquity of the choice paradigm can be interpreted as the outcome of a determined effort to recast the balance of responsibility between the state and citizens. What has been dubbed the 'personalisation agenda' now 'stretches right across government', encompassing health initiatives and pensions policy.<sup>3</sup> The stated aims of this agenda is to reframe the role of state-led initiatives in terms of empowering individuals to make informed choices, based on information provided by government. Choice is in turn presented as a means of making service-providers more responsive to the variegated needs of citizens. One can see this individualization of responsibility in a number of fields, extending beyond the realm of the state as such. For example, the individualization of health risks has also been associated with the burgeoning of socio-cultural practices such as the growth of the fitness industry, self-help publishing, and lifestyle media. In the realm of business, concerns over both health and environment have led to increasing attention being given to the labelling of food products. The discursive individualization of responsibility around various 'risks' or hazards related to personal health and environmental futures leads to considerable faith being invested in the role that information can play in empowering citizens to pursue their own goals in a way that is conducive to just collective outcomes in markets.

The proliferation of choice in policy discourse and public debate does not, of course, go uncontested. There is a well established line of liberal-left criticism that sees the extension of the logic of choice into more and more areas of public and private life as part of a much more pernicious tendency, whereby the ‘triumph of the market’ has plummeted us into the ‘age of selfishness’:

‘The marketisation of everything has made society, and each of us, more competitive. The logic of the market has now become universal, the ideology not just of neoliberals, but of us all, the criterion we use not just about our job or when shopping, but about our innermost selves, and our most intimate relationships. The prophets who announced the market revolution saw it in contestation with the state: in fact, it proved far more insidious than that, eroding the very notion of what it means to be human. The credo of self, inextricably entwined with the gospel of the market, has hijacked the fabric of our lives. We live in an ego-market society’.<sup>4</sup>

For all its critical overtones, this kind of lament does nothing to question taken-for-granted assumptions about how markets work, and about how consumers operate in them. In public policy debates, as well as in broader public debates about globalisation, neoliberalism, and privatization, there is a polarisation between being for or against ‘the market’. The shared assumption that underwrites the arguments of both market-proponents and market-critics is that markets are individualising, egoistical and self-interested:

‘Consumers are therefore distinctive in the way they make choices (as self-regarding individuals), receive goods (through a series of instrumental, temporary and bilateral relationships with suppliers), and exercise power (passively, through aggregate signalling)’.<sup>5</sup>

This critical description mirrors the positive normative ideal of a certain kind of economic liberalism. Proponents of the market think that people *should* act like this, despite lots of evidence that *they don’t*. Critics of the market tend to assume that people *do* act like this, perhaps increasingly so, but they think that they *ought not to*, and therefore intone them to act more responsibly.

## **2). The ethical problematization of everyday consumption**

Standard critiques of consumerism tend to obscure what is most distinctive about the ways in which discourses of choice currently circulate in policy and public debates, by accepting at face value that ‘choice’ is simply a matter of egoistical self-interest promoted by rampant neo-liberalism. To get a better handle on what it at stake in the proliferation of ‘choice’ discourses, it might be better to think not in terms of what theorists of governmentality call ‘advanced liberalism’. This theme better captures the internal relationship between discourses of *individual choice* and discourses of *individual responsibility* without reducing this ‘synapsis’ to an ideological function of a singular logic of capitalist reproduction. Nikolas Rose argues that the prevalence of the register of consumerism has its roots in the ‘de-socialisation’ of modes of governing, whereby it becomes possible to govern people by regulating the choices made by autonomous actors in the context of their everyday, ordinary commitments to friends, family and community. Consumption becomes a new vector for governing society ‘through the ‘responsibilized’ and ‘educated’ anxieties and aspirations of individuals and their families’.<sup>6</sup> On this understanding, consumption is transformed into a medium for making-up ethical selves, not in the sense of conforming to externally imposed codes of conduct in the name of collective good, but in the sense of ‘the active and practical shaping by individuals of the daily practices of their own lives in the name of their own pleasures, contentments and fulfilments’.<sup>7</sup> From this perspective, discourses and practices of consumerism are central to this programme of responsabilization.

The governmentality approach emphasises that the articulation of ‘choice’ and ‘responsibility’ is the result of the efforts of a diverse set of actors pursuing plural ends. It throws light upon the redistribution of responsibility between states, markets, and individuals in a number of fields: ‘So whereas in the domain of health a discourse of the ‘unhealthy Western’ lifestyle has moved towards an individualized monitoring of health risks (with all the practices that come with it, such as fitness, healthy food and self-monitoring), the environmental sphere sees the emergence of individualization of food risks through the introduction of labelling and web-based information services’.<sup>8</sup> From this perspective, the proliferation of consumer choice is indicative of the modularisation of a new rationality of governing through individualization. The exercise of choice

becomes a basic element of ‘the subjective meaning of consumption for the ordinary individual in their everyday life’.<sup>9</sup> In this move, the very nature of individuality is transformed along the lines of consumer choice, so that individuals are thought of as ‘not merely ‘free to choose’, but *obliged to be free*, to understand and enact their lives in terms of choice’.<sup>10</sup> Individuals are, it is argued, reconfigured by being offered an identity as ‘consumers’:

‘In the name of themselves as consumers with rights they take up a different relation with experts, and set up their own forms of ‘counter-expertise’, not only in relation to food and drink and other ‘consumables’, but also in relation to the domains that were pre-eminently ‘social’ – health, education, housing, insurance and the like’.<sup>11</sup>

Experts – advertisers, market researchers, psy-experts of various sorts – become crucial to this new regime of conduct, acting as ‘concerned professionals seeking to allay the problems, anxieties and uncertainties engendered by the seemingly so perplexing conditions of our present. They operate a regime of the self where competent personhood is thought to depend upon the continual exercise of freedom, and where one is encouraged to understand one’s life, actually or potentially, not in terms of fate or social status, but in terms of one’s success or failure acquiring the skills and making the choices to actualise oneself’.<sup>12</sup>

There is a trend towards using the analytics of advanced liberal governmentality to bolster Marxian analysis of neoliberalism. This marriage of convenience depends on a particular understanding of how macro-level changes need to be sutured into everyday life by bringing off coherent ‘interpellative’ subject-effects at the level of individuals. On this reading, the proliferation of discourses of ‘choice’ is just part of a broad hegemonic agenda of neoliberal restructuring, whereby elites reconfigure formations of subjectivity in line with the structural requirements of de-regulated, liberalised markets. This argument holds that extending the range of activities that are commodified, commercialized and marketized necessarily implies that people need to be re-tooled and re-worked in order to recognise themselves as responsible consumers, entrepreneurial subjects, and active participants.

This chapter develops an alternative account of the relationship between discourses and practices of choice and responsibility. Rather than assuming that governing is mediated through interpellative subject-effects, we look instead at how efforts at governing consumption engage creatively with people's existing dispositions. This conceptual focus upon dispositions rather than subjectivities follows from the empirical observation that far from 'choice' being straightforwardly championed and promoted, it is increasingly circulated as a term in policy discourse and public debate by being *problematized*. In short, the problem of how to ensure that the choices of putatively free individuals are exercised responsibly – in terms both of those individuals' own good and the good of broader communities – has become a recurrent theme of contemporary public debate. For example, choice is problematized in terms of the potential of increased individual choice to conflict with public interest goals of sustainability and conservation; in terms of increased choice leading to greater anxiety and reduced quality of life, even reduced levels of happiness; in terms of the likelihood of choice increasing or even maintaining equity in social provision and access to public services. In short, choice circulates as a term of public debate only in and through this register of responsibility for the self and for others; this is what a standard interpretation of 'neoliberalism' misses what is most distinctive about the contemporary discourse of choice, which focuses less on questions of choice as a vehicle of efficient allocation than it does on concerns with legitimacy, trust, and capacity building.

The problematization of choice is most evident in current debates about smoking, obesity, and other health related issues in which the extension of choice in consumer markets is seen to lead to deleterious effects not just on individuals but also on the fabric of collective life itself. In this set of debates, the concern is with how to ensure that the exercise of choice does not impact negatively on the consuming self. Our focus in this chapter is with a distinct, although related set of debates in which issues of choice are related to a set of more anonymous, other-regarding concerns with environment sustainability, global warming, and social responsibility. We critically assess the discursive field populated by a set of think-tanks and consumer organisations including The Future Foundation (a commercial think tank dedicated to understanding the future of

consumerism); the New Economics Foundation (a sustainable economy think tank); the Co-Operative Bank (which has its own distinctive ethical stance on social responsibility and ecological sustainability); the National Consumer Council (a lobbying group for all consumers); The Green Alliance (a think tank on sustainable development); and the Fabian Society (a political think tank). All of these organisations regularly engage in public debates about consumption, sustainability, environmentalism, and social responsibility. And it is here that one can discern a distinctive mode of problematizing choice as a means of recasting the responsibilities of consumers in collective rather than individualising ways. We argue here that in so far as the normative discourse of markets and consumerism is rhetorically associated with paternalist discourses of responsibility, then this problematization of choice involves a double movement in which the individualization of responsibility opens up new possibilities for collective action through the medium of markets and the repertoires of consumerism.

The analytics of governmentality throws light upon important aspects of contemporary consumption practices. But as Bevir and Newman also argued in their chapters, it tends to neglect issues of agency. In particular, it tends to assume that the subject-effects implied or aimed for by programmes of rule actually come-off in practice. There is something a little too neat about the shift in modes of governing that this approach identifies; for all the emphasis on ‘contingent lash-ups of thought and action’, there is a strong sense that projects aimed at governing conduct actually work. This observation certainly implies the need for more ‘dialogic’ approaches to the relationships between programmes of rule and practices of subject-formation.<sup>13</sup> But more than this, it requires a reconsideration of whether these sorts of programmes do, in fact, aim for interpellative subject-effects at all. By taking a ‘dispositional’ approach to the analysis of governing people’s practices, we develop the idea that consumption is increasingly constructed as an arena for the ‘ethical problematization’ of various aspects of people’s activities. This notion of ethical problematization directs analytical attention to investigating the conditions ‘for individuals to recognize themselves as particular kinds of persons and to reflect upon their conduct - to problematize it - such that they may work upon and transform themselves in certain ways and towards particular goals’.<sup>14</sup> If consumerism is indeed an



important contemporary political rationality, then it works not through the promotion of unfettered hedonism and self-interest, but by making problematic the exercise of consumer choice in terms of various, ever proliferating responsibilities and ethical imperatives. We argue that people are increasingly expected to treat their consumption practices as subject to all sorts of moral injunctions: they are expected to do so through their capacity to exercise discretion through choice; in the everyday activities of social reproduction mediated through commodity consumption; and in relation to a very wide range of substantive concepts of the good life. For example, the Ethical Consumption Research Association (ECRA), which publishes the *Ethical Consumer* magazine, explicitly addresses its readers as political actors who use their daily purchasing as votes to register their approval for certain objectives and to help make corporations accountable. Here, consumer choice is presented as medium of ‘democratised morality’,<sup>15</sup> in the sense that people now have choice about their own moral conduct and principles, and with this comes ‘need to make their own decisions, rather than follow established norms’. Here, then, we can see the process of ethical problematization of consumer choice made explicit: choice is presented not just as a medium for the expression of moral preferences, but as the very mechanism through which people constitute themselves as moral agents in the first place.

In the rest of this chapter we focus on two aspects of the problematization of consumption and consumer choice. In Section 3, we examine policy documents on public service provision, think tank reports on sustainable consumption, consumer reports and research polls on ethical consumers, and campaign materials of ethical consumerism organisations. We identify a distinctive discursive register in which consumers are addressed as bearing *responsibility* both for their own choices and the effects of their choices on others. But this is not simply a matter of exhortation. It reflects an explicit concern with rethinking the ‘the art of influencing’<sup>16</sup> consumer behaviour by deploying various practical devices and strategies: education campaigns, through learning about and utilising network hubs, through labelling and certification campaigns, through linking consumption purchases to opportunities to engage in campaigns. What can be discerned in this field is an emergent rationality that holds that the best way of influencing people’s

dispositions is to deploy the classical arts of persuasion. This finding is relevant for both how we conceptualize the rationalities behind the ethical problematization of contemporary consumption, and also for how we might go about empirically investigating ordinary people's engagements with these interventions in ways that do justice to their own competencies as persons, and not just subjects. In Section 4, we draw on focus-group research on ethical consumerism to explore the forms of routine reasoning that 'consumers' engage in when confronted with a proliferating range of potential acts of *responsible choice*.

### **3). Making the 'ethical consumer' visible**

From the perspective of purist economic liberalism, each person is seen as a sovereign actor determining their own conception of the good, and pursuing these by means of simple means-end rationality in the market place. It is worth noting that what one might dub 'Third-Way' invocations of the market and consumer choice differ significantly from this purist position. For example, one recent think-tank report on public services argues that there is no homogenous sense of the social good or the public interest, and goes so far as to suggest that 'the catch-all term citizen is unhelpful when it assumes there is a homogenous 'citizen interest'.<sup>17</sup> But these sorts of arguments are not invoked to support an unfettered individualism. Quite the contrary, the 'personalisation' agenda is premised on the assumption that extending choice is the primary mechanism for ensuring that service providers will be responsive to the diverse needs of individuals and groups. This perspective also entrains a particular understanding of 'democracy', one which privileges respecting people's preferences if these are properly informed choices, and assumes in turn that preferences are effectively expressed in the choices made in markets or surrogate markets. Consumer choice, in this 'market populist' paradigm, is a mechanism for reconciling the equally compelling concerns of individual 'aspiration' with pluralistic conceptions of the public good. In this paradigm, then, people are understood less as 'citizens' responsible for *the* public interest, and rather as 'consumers, stakeholders or individuals concerned with the wider public interest'.<sup>18</sup>

This approach is, of course, open to all sorts of criticisms. As Clarke argues, choice is

much more complex and variegated than the market-based model tends to suggest:

‘We formulate many choices in our lives that never come near to the market-place, and we have many modes of trying to realise such choices (power, negotiation, seduction, compromise, collaboration, brute force, emotional manipulation, voting, for example’.<sup>19</sup>

The limitations of the prevalent conceptualisation of choice in public policy have, in fact, become a focus of attention in a range of recent interventions by think-tanks and NGOs engaged in debates about public policy. It is here that one can identify a distinctive problematization of choice, one that accepts certain precepts of the prevalent paradigm, but that reinterprets them in ways that amount to a more thorough-going ‘collectivization’ of practices of consumer choice.

What emerges from this field of discourse is a figure of the ‘citizenly consumer’, actively choosing, indeed choosy, in the marketplace, but not necessarily on narrowly self-interested grounds at all. Consumers are described with attributes usually associated with citizens. For example, the Ethical Purchasing Index (EPI), produced annually by the Co-Op and the New Economics Foundation, presents consumers as ‘influential, proactive and engaged’,<sup>20</sup> as supporting their communities by shopping locally, and as acting as citizens by rewarding companies with records of good practice.<sup>21</sup> The EPI is used to engage with a range of audiences: the general public, key retail stakeholders, and policy makers and government departments. The EPI is both a ‘catalogue’ that measures ethical consumerism in order to lobby these actors, and thereby also a ‘catalyst to its growth’.<sup>22</sup> The EPI is an example of an initiative that combines an emphasis on consumer choice with an argument for new forms of government regulation. Consumer choice in a range of ‘ethical’ product markets is reinterpreted by these organisations as an expression of a broad public feeling in favour of certain sorts of collective goals that, on its own, consumer choice in the market cannot secure: consumer choices therefore need to be empowered not only with ‘information’, but also by explicit intervention and endorsement by government in the form of regulatory interventions: consumers pull, producers push and governments endorse.<sup>23</sup>

‘Choice’ in the EPI is, then, more than simply an aggregated market signal; it is discursively re-framed as bearing other, more overtly political preferences. Here we see ‘choice’ being reconfigured as a dimension of civic engagement. In the process, the multiplicity of motivations that are collected under the umbrella of ‘choice’ are unpacked:

‘most people would support people’s right to choose – if not on health principles, then on moral or efficiency ones’.<sup>24</sup>

In practice, choice might be exercised on all three of these grounds – health, morality, or efficiency – in the course of any simple set of activities like the daily shop.<sup>25</sup> Campaign organisations and think-tanks produce a variety of typologies of the ‘consumer’ that, when taken together, are indicative of a broadly shared concern to better understand the diverse motivations that lay behind ‘consumer’ choice. In particular, there is an increasing concern to differentiate the ‘ethical’ motivations that shape consumer choice. For the Fairtrade Foundation, ethical consumers might be ‘activists’ (persuaders and supporters), or ‘regular’ ethical purchasers, or ‘infrequent’ ethical purchasers. For the Co-op, consumers might concentrate on ‘looking after own’ or ‘doing what I can’; they might be members of the ‘brand generation’, ‘conscientious consumers’, or ‘global watchdogs’.<sup>26</sup> Business studies researchers are more blunt: ethical consumerism is divided between the ‘die hards’ and the ‘don’t cares’.<sup>27</sup> These exercises in categorisation are not purely ‘academic’; they are put to work in the public realm to make visible the motivations that are hidden by thinking of consumer choice simply in terms of market signalling.

If choice circulates in the public realm by being problematized, and if it is increasingly problematized in a register of responsibility, then it also seems that consumer choice is open to re-inscription in terms which re-legitimise forms of collective intervention in markets. We have already seen one version of this re-inscription - the ‘thin’ New Labour version in which choice is understood as a mechanism for ensuring more responsive modes of public service provision, conceptualised primarily in terms of *principal-agent* relations. Here the burden of ensuring that individual *and* collective outcomes are achieved is, indeed, thrown squarely on the consumer:

‘If greater choice and control is extended to consumers, individuals must be prepared to take on more responsibility for the consequences of those choices.’<sup>28</sup>

‘[T]he public will be increasingly required to take responsibility for ensuring the public interest is balanced against individual needs’.<sup>29</sup>

Just how this ‘responsibility’ is to be enforced is left unsaid.

Another version of the re-inscription of ‘consumer choice’ is evident in the problematization of individual choice as bearing within it all kinds of ‘risks’, whereby rolling-out mechanisms of choice to ensure more efficient service provision carries with it the likelihood that people will be allowed too much freedom to make bad choices. It is this concern that is evident in some of the interventions surrounding diet, obesity, and smoking:

‘our ‘freedom’ of choice is conditioned in newly unhelpful ways which misdirect our energies, and, as a result, individuals who make self-maximising choices often end up inadvertently minimising themselves instead. [...] The significance of prevailing value frameworks is heightened today by the fact that we are now being drawn to make choices that may not obviously impact on the freedoms of others or clearly injure the common good [...] but which are bad for us as individuals.’<sup>30</sup>

Here, choice is re-framed as an inherently uncertain mechanism, just as likely to rebound on the individual as it is to undermine wider collective goals.<sup>31</sup> And it is on these grounds that a renewed justification of regulatory intervention to enable and enhance ‘genuine’ choice is developed. For example, a Fabian pamphlet suggests that there are numerous ways in which the same needs or wants can be met, through devices called ‘choice sets’. A choice set is conceptualised as a collection of interconnected acts of consumption, the behaviour that comes with them and the production and infrastructure that supports them. Each choice set excludes or precludes other choices and options, so that ‘there is no such thing as a purely ‘individual’ act of choice: we always choose within a choice set’.<sup>32</sup> The argument is that individual rational choices do not necessarily lead to ‘collective goods’, as individual choices may circumvent or alter choices available to others. Here, then, we see a more explicit combination of discourses of individual responsibility with proactive arguments in favour of state and non-state intervention in the regulation and

configuration of systems of provision.

This more assertively ‘citizenly’ model of consumer choice forms part of a repertoire of narrative storylines mobilised by a range of organisations, including think-tanks such as the New Economics Foundation, Fabian Society, Food Ethics Council, Demos, Green Alliance, Future Foundation; consumer groups such as the National Consumer Council campaign groups such as Ethical Consumer Research Association and the Fairtrade Foundation; and development charities such as Christian Aid and Oxfam. These organisations do not form a coherent ‘movement’; they campaign around different issues, have different organisational forms and membership bases; and focus on diverse goals, from public services to sustainability to global trade justice. Nonetheless, we can discern a family of related concerns around consumer choice and markets amongst this range of organisations. In debates around sustainable consumption, for example, choice is reconfigured in relation to ‘institutional contexts’<sup>33</sup> and ‘social scaffolding’<sup>34</sup>. The idea that information is all that is required to ensure effective market supply in response to consumer demand for cleaner, fairer, greener products is increasingly rejected in these debates. Instead, it is argued that the key to effective change lies in providing infrastructures that support sustainable practices combined with a degree of ‘self-binding’ constraint arrived at through regulating choice-sets. The consumer-citizen is seen as a rational agent mobilised by information and educational devices *only* if these are accompanied by changes in the institutional settings and infrastructures of consumption. This reframing of choice and responsibility in more collective directions is typified by the 2006 report of the Sustainable Consumption Roundtable, an initiative of the National Consumer Council and the Sustainable Development Commission. Entitled *I Will If You Will*, the report argues that a ‘critical mass’ of citizens and businesses is waiting to act on the challenge of sustainability, but that it is constrained from doing so through lack of effective government support and direction.<sup>35</sup> The report is underwritten by the claim that expecting individuals or businesses to act ‘sustainably’ on the basis of isolated decisions is ineffective because neither set of actors has any sense of contributing to collective change. The report is indicative of a marked shift in thinking on sustainable consumption away from a focus only on the responsibilities of consumers. It emphasises instead the

proactive role of government in providing leadership and creating ‘a supportive framework rather than exhorting individuals to go against the grain’.<sup>36</sup>

These interventions challenge the assumption that consumer choices in markets are equivalent to democratically expressed preferences that need necessarily to be respected. Between them, this set of organisations is engaged in a broader public debate concerning the scope of what Goodin refers to as ‘permissible paternalism’.<sup>37</sup> While some of the arguments made for state regulation are made on non-paternalistic grounds (i.e. in the name of the harms that certain patterns of individual choice bring about on other actors), what lies behind the discussions of *institutional contexts*, *choice-sets*, and *social scaffolding* is the claim that market choices are not necessarily a means of expressing preferences that deserve democratic respect at all. And the arguments mustered in support are not simply about a lack of proper information invalidating people’s choices. In part, the argument which is made is that these choices express deeper preferences that are only made visible through acts of interpretation. In part, arguments address the degree to which people have the ‘volitional’ will to make the choices that they would, in fact, prefer to make. The exemplary case of this type of justification for paternalistically preferring some form of substituted judgement for the expressed preferences of ordinary people is that of addiction. It is noteworthy in this respect just how much of the debate about responsible, sustainable and ethical consumption invokes a rhetoric of being ‘locked-in’ and ‘addicted’ to challenge narrow concepts of choice, information, and preferences. We can see, then, that in these interventions, the meaning and significance of ‘choice’ is contested around an axis that holds that democratic governance should respond to and respect people’s preferences. Two things are at stake in these debates: how to glean just what these preferences are, and just which preferences should be respected and which ones can be paternalistically substituted.

#### **4). (Ir)responsible consumers or sceptical citizens?**

We have so far suggested that far from being straightforwardly championed, ‘choice’

circulates in public culture through being problematized by policy-makers, pundits, and professors. Above all, choice is problematized in a register of ‘responsibility’: personal responsibility certainly, but also responsibility for a whole variety of broader goals, such as the public interest, community, environmental conservation, or the alleviation of global poverty. The problematization of choice is part of a broader ethical problematization of everyday consumption, in which people are increasingly subjected to all sorts of demands that they should treat ordinary practices like the weekly shop, their journey to work, or their choice of holiday destination as bearing a number of moral burdens. This problematization of consumer choice might, in some cases, involve an element of individualization, although this is far from always the case. It certainly does not, however, involve the constitution of consumers as wholly self-interested egoists. In this section, we consider the ways in which ordinary people actually respond to this array of moral demands on their everyday conduct.

There is already an extensive literature on how ‘consumers’ engage with campaigns around sustainable consumption, ethical consumerism, or environmentally responsible consumption. Some of this work circles around an apparent conundrum that people, when asked, often express support for various ‘ethical’ objectives like conservation or fair trade, but that their actual behaviour tends not to bear these expressed preferences out. The so-called ‘Attitude/Behaviour gap’ might, however, be as much an effect of a flawed methodological framework that supposes that ‘attitudes’ are free-standing mental states rather than rhetorical constructs through and through. More sophisticated research focuses on the ‘vocabularies of blame’ through which people apparently absolve themselves of responsibility for changing their consumption practices by displacing this responsibility onto other actors. More sophisticated still is recent research that acknowledges that consumers are often effectively ‘locked-in’ to certain patterns of consumption by the material infrastructures of modern, urban living; and that the commitments that people have to certain consumption behaviours might be deeply held emotional, affective ones that cannot be sloughed-off just like that.<sup>38</sup> What all of this research shares is a sense that the problem when it comes to changing patterns of consumption is the *consumer*. Better understandings of the role of infrastructures and of

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emotional commitments is still posed in a register of expertise aimed at enabling these *obstacles* to behaviour change to be overcome more effectively. The ‘content’ of responsibility is, in these discussions, still taken for granted.

There is a certain irony here: as approaches to sustainable and ethical consumption have moved away from an information-led approach, they run into the problem of appearing to abandon the basic assumption of those information-led approaches. These do at least acknowledge ‘consumers’ to be competent, rational moral subjects whose preferences and opinions deserve some respect. In contrast, as research focuses more and more on finding ways of ‘motivating’ behaviour change amongst consumers, the question of how the conceptions of the public good that guide such interventions are defined recedes into the background.

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Research in the areas of sustainable and ethical consumption is often framed by the problem of motivating consumers to adjust their behaviour away from narrow self-interest to more responsible patterns. This framing tends to accept the prevalent assumption that consumers are, in fact, atomistic utility maximizers, and focuses on finding the secret to changing this orientation. But this might seriously misjudge the sorts of rationalities that govern consumption. The force of critiques of consumption from Veblen through to Bourdieu has established the degree to which consumer behaviour is thoroughly social, involving questions of status, distinction and social position. This implies that consumption behaviour takes place not according to narrowly instrumental means/end rationalities, but is shaped by forms of communicative and strategic rationality that presume a competency in anticipating other people’s responses and feelings.<sup>39</sup> And while critiques of conspicuous consumption and social distinction suppose that the positional dynamics of consumption take the form of zero-sum games, there is no need to suppose that the rationalities that shape consumption cannot accommodate ‘ethical’ criteria of various sorts. The role of ‘consumer’ might in fact lend itself just as easily, just as rationally, to the precepts of altruism as to those of egoism. As one of a multitude of consumers, any one person may conclude that their own consumption choices will have little chance of making any significant impact on aggregate outcomes. But this rule holds

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just as much for their own egoistical interests as it does for any wider ‘ethical’ objective.

The narrow pursuit of one’s narrow interests is not any more rational in markets then pursuing other, more ‘ethical’ outcomes: it is perfectly rational for consumers to pursue less self-centred goals, including acting on the basis of various ethical preferences, in so far as their structural powerlessness ‘frees’ them up from the rationality of narrow self-interest.<sup>40</sup>

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The incessant focus on the problem of motivating consumer behaviour might, then, be poorly thought out on two grounds. Firstly, it might identify the wrong agents of change.

And secondly, it might misunderstand the degree to which consumer behaviour is ‘always already’ shaped by all sorts of concerns that are not reducible to either utilitarian self-interest or aestheticized self-centredness<sup>41</sup>. In this section, we want to broach what might well be an almost scandalous suggestion: what if, when people talk about responsibility, and especially when they assert clear, finite limits to their own responsibility, we were to take these assertions not as signs of something else – of deeply held affective investments, or as indicators of their being ‘locked-in’ to some pattern of behaviour – but at face value, as justified, citizenly arguments about not just *who* should be responsible but also over the scope of practices that should be problematized in this register of responsibility in the first place?

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This suggestion follows in part from a set of methodological commitments to understanding talk-data rhetorically,<sup>42</sup> an understanding that builds on a set of theoretical commitments to thinking of practices of self-formation not on the post-structuralist paradigm of recognition and subjection but in terms of narratives, especially narratives of the self.<sup>43</sup> These narratives hold that self-making is embedded in practices of accountability that ‘go all the way down’ as it were. But we also draw some support for approaching the question of ‘consumer motivation’ in this way from recent conceptualisations of this question in the discursive field we sketched in the previous section. The Green Alliance and Demos have recently argued that the key to influencing consumer choice is to better understand processes of shared learning through peer groups and social networks. This implies a focus on the ‘arts of influencing’, identifying and

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recruiting 'intermediaries' in peer networks who persuade and influence others in conversation: 'behaviour spreads through conversations, social learning and peer group networks', and so the aim of campaigns should be to 'get people talking, inspire curiosity'.<sup>44</sup> What is most interesting about this reconceptualization, one that is evident in other fields too, is that it recognizes the degree to which people's 'motivations' are not individualized at all, but are embedded in networks of sociability. If think-tanks can acknowledge this, it shouldn't be too much of a stretch to imagine that academic researchers might also start from the assumption that ordinary people are capable moral agents. We need to take seriously what Sayer has called the 'lay normativities' of everyday life, which refers to 'a range of normative rationales, which matter greatly to actors, as they are implicated in their commitments, identities and ways of life. Those rationales concern what is of value, how to live, what is worth striving for and what is not'.<sup>45</sup> Focusing on these lay normativities implies taking seriously the things that 'matter' to people when they engage with various demands and imperatives to adjust their own conduct in relation to norms of responsible consumer behaviour.

In our research on how ordinary people relate to ethical consumer campaigns, we have used focus-group methodologies to investigate the 'lay normativities' through which people delineate the scope of activities that they are willing to problematize in 'ethical' or 'moral' registers. Focus groups are very good at accessing data about interaction.<sup>46</sup> It is this that recommends them as a means of exploring the ethical problematization of consumerism. In particular, focus group methodologies are effective at elaborating the interactive dynamics through which people negotiate various discursive positionings.<sup>47</sup> This process involves practices of expressing attitudes, providing factual versions of reality, and expressing regrets and giving justifications. They are, we would argue, an appropriate methodology for exploring one of the key principles of narrative accounts of the self, namely that taking-up or dissenting from positions is shaped by concerns of accountability.<sup>48</sup> Wetherell suggests that in talk, people 'display what they know - their practical reasoning skills and competencies'.<sup>49</sup> This capacity for deliberative reasoning is folded into the embodied, habitual dimensions of everyday practices.<sup>50</sup> In focus groups, we see people jointly considering the extent to which certain maxims do and should hold

for them, by taking their ordinary practices as objects of reflection.

For analytical purposes we consider the discourses and campaigns around ethical and responsible consumerism to function as types of ‘positioning’. Positioning in this sense is ‘vertical’. At the same time, positioning goes on along a ‘horizontal’ plane, as people introduce examples and topics of their own, and question or confirm each other’s train of thought. In terms of focus groups themselves, the role of the facilitator of the group is a surrogate for a vertical ‘positioning’ – they effectively address normative propositions which the participants then consider through their own interaction. And throughout the focus group exchanges around these sorts of topics, we find people agreeing and disagreeing, introducing topics into conversations as examples to consider from different aspects, and considering the different reasons they might have for assenting to some imperatives and dissenting from others.

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This is the methodological framework that has guided the analysis of focus group data collected from 10 different groups, undertaken in the first 6 months of 2004, in different social areas of Bristol. Here we want to use this material for illustrative purposes, to make two points about the ways in which discourses of consumer choice and responsible consumerism are worked-over by the local reasoning and situated agency of this selection of residents of Bristol. In particular, we draw out two themes that recur through these discussions. Firstly, a great deal of everyday commodity consumption has little if anything to do with ‘choice’, at least as this is supposed to function by proponents of the market, left-liberal critics, and grand sociological theory. In fleshing this claim out, we endorse Miller’s argument concerning the degree to which consumption practices are often embedded in networks of obligation, duty, sacrifice, and love; as well as the ordinary, gendered work of social reproduction.<sup>51</sup> Secondly, we return to the ‘scandalous’ dimension of our analysis: we want to suggest that sometimes when people talk about their roles as consumers they accept that they do have certain responsibilities; sometimes they make excuses for not doing more; but sometimes they make pertinent sounding justifications for not considering it their responsibility at all; and maybe, just maybe, if you listen hard enough, they might be asserting finite limits, to how much they, as

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individuals, can be expected to be responsible for, and they might also be articulating justifiable skepticism towards the whole frame of ‘responsibility’ that is being addressed to them.

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Firstly, then, the question of the degree to which consumption is about choice, and the degree to which choice is reducible to the paradigm of purchasing. As we have already suggested, this idea might overestimate the degree to which being a ‘consumer’ is a strongly held point of personal identity that centres on the exercise of discrete acts of monetized choice. Arguments within the sustainable consumption field dovetail with work on the ethnography of shopping to demonstrate that lots of everyday ‘choices’ about what to buy have little enough to do with self-interest or personal identity, but an awful lot to do with obligations to others, love, care, compassion, and vulnerability. Once again the point of this argument is that there might be much less ‘choice’ involved in the conduct of ordinary activities like doing the weekly shop or buying treats for your kids.

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There are various ways in which the people in our focus groups indicate the dependence of their own consumption behaviour on the relationships in which their lives, their cares and concerns are embedded. Having kids made a difference to Robert, for example:

‘My girlfriend and I had a couple of kids about 10 months ago, twins. And we buy more organic now cos of them so I suppose that’s changed. Maybe we would have done a bit before but I think now we are just thinking about what they’re eating for health reasons’.<sup>52</sup>

Others talked about how much of their shopping was done with friends; for some women, this was a matter of the time available during the week when kids were at school; or on Saturday’s, when husbands were at the football. Participants also talked about how they learnt about the ‘ethics’ of different products not from formal information campaigns, but through social networks: from friends, from church groups, or from what their kids tell them about what they have learnt at school. On the other hand, it is not necessarily the case that people who do engage actively in ‘ethical’ shopping think of this in terms of having an economic impact through the market; it is just as likely to be part of a smaller, more modest practice of trying to influence friends and neighbours:

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*Abigail*: 'More than thinking that I can change the world if I buy a certain way I think I can influence the people around me, maybe my friends will see that I have bought fair-trade tea bags and the next time they are in the supermarket they think oh yes that looks nice.'<sup>53</sup>

So ordinary everyday consumption isn't necessarily all about personal choice in the marketplace. A great deal of it is embedded in material infrastructures<sup>54</sup> and affective practices<sup>55</sup> that are not appropriately described as matters of 'choice' at all. But nor, it seems, do people appreciate being constantly bombarded with information about what is good and bad for them – in health terms and in moral terms too. It's far from clear that our focus group participants respond to all the information about products as rational choosers. They seem just as likely to express exasperation at all the information directed at them:

'There's something different each week. 'Don't eat chicken' this week because this, this, and this'.<sup>56</sup>

Perhaps more fundamentally, this exasperation is often articulated in a register that seems to delineate the scope of 'choice' that people should be expected to exercise quite tightly:

*Alexandra*: 'I don't know half of what is going on. If you knew everything that was going through all these different places, you wouldn't eat'.

*Tracey*: 'If you knew all these things, everything that was going into these different things, you'd have a nervous breakdown wouldn't you.'

*Peter*: 'You'd starve to death wouldn't you'.<sup>57</sup>

One could, at a stretch, interpret this sort of exchange in terms of people displacing or denying their own responsibility, but that would seem to us to remain deaf to the tone of exasperation and vexation in which these sorts of points are being made. It seems just as plausible to interpret this exchange as expressing the limits of 'choice' as a plausible model of how people can carry on the ordinary work of everyday social reproduction. People's consumption is embedded in their practices,<sup>58</sup> and this means when people are asked to justify their consumption behaviour, they quickly turn to justifying their commitments and relationships – they don't talk about being a 'consumer', but about being a parent, a friend, a spouse, or a citizen, an employee, or a professional. In turn, this

means that, as one of our respondents puts it, 'you can't carry the torch for everything'.<sup>59</sup> For Paul, any 'ethical' decisions about consumption followed from and fitted into his broader patterns of life and work.

The ambivalence that people have about choice is neatly illustrated by discussions about the advantages of vegetable box schemes. These can be a convenient way of getting your veg shopping delivered to the doorstep and being 'ethical' in an organic way at the same time. Some people don't like the lack of choice implied by these schemes:

*Carole:* 'I knew someone who has one of those boxes that you're referring to, and she's very pleased with it.'

*Stephanie:* 'I know somebody and she's thinking of cancelling it because they there's only two of them and they've no control, over what goes in it so they get rather a lot of what they've got a lot of and sometimes it's not always what you want.'

*Janet:* 'They can't specify what they want then?'

*Stephanie:* 'No you just get a selection.'

*David:* 'Of what's available, yeah.'

*Stephanie:* 'So they're thinking of cancelling it.'

*Carole:* 'You can choose what you want from ours.'<sup>60</sup>

Here, choice does seem to be a matter of relevance to people's attitudes towards this particular 'ethical' consumption practice. But some people appreciate the lack of choice, because it adds a kind of surprise and a kind of obligation to their everyday cooking activities:

*Michael:* 'There are veg, boxes, organic veg, boxes you can get'.

*Rachel:* 'That's true. Yeah, that's true, you can just go pick it up on a Thursday night or whatever'.

*Nigel:* 'Which one do you get?'

*Simon:* 'Green Wheel'

*Rachel:* 'Any good or mouldy?'

*Simon:* 'No it's good, it's ten pounds for fruit and veg for two for a week and there's always potatoes, onions, carrots and then odd greens and things and enough fruit to last'.

*Rachel:* 'I like the way they just arrive and you don't have to have that thought about shall I buy that or not?'

*Simon:* 'It forces you to eat more fruit and vegetables'.

*Rachel:* 'Exactly...'

*Simon:* 'Because you think I can't chuck out...'

*Rachel:* 'Not bloody broccoli again!'

*John:* 'So you don't have a choice what you get, it's just thrown in?'

*Simon:* 'Yeah but there's always potatoes and onions and staple things, that's part of the joy, it's interesting new things arrive'.<sup>61</sup>

In our research, these ordinary concerns about when and where choice is a good thing, and the degree to which 'ethical' considerations can or even should enter into everyday consumer choice, sometimes breakout into more explicit discussions of the 'politics' of choice and responsibility. This brings us to the second point we want to make about the ways in which people talk about the responsibilities that often come attached to consumption practices. People routinely express a sense that they can't be expected to 'do everything' on the grounds of time, resources, and other practicalities. But sometimes they also explicitly raise doubts whether all this should be thought of as part of their responsibility at all:

*Arun:* 'We look upon life and enjoy it, and try and have some ethical stuff there as well so if you're too worried about it you're going to end up just not eating anything.'

*Rachel:* 'Or going anywhere...'

*Arun:* 'Yeah exactly, you wouldn't want to leave your house.'

*Simon:* 'But if everybody was 10% better that would be enough to make it better all round.'

*John:* 'Why do we have to do it? Why doesn't the government do it? Why do we have to pay more on products that are bad? Why can't they legislate?'

*Michael:* 'Because the lobby groups. Too many other interests.'

*John:* 'Other countries don't. We just eat shit! We eat shit and pay less for it.'

*Rachel:* 'They could subsidise organic farming much more than they do.'

*John:* 'The subsidies for organic farming in Germany are huge. But it's our own fault sometimes, we bought the shit, we buy it.'



*Michael*: ‘The thing is it’s like ultimately the government should have a responsibility to make sure that people are safe and healthy and all that and they kind of I don’t know whether they think they do their best but there are so many powerful lobby groups, I don’t know whether it’s the sugar industry, the fat industry, the tobacco industry, the petrol industry and they just lobby and they just give...’<sup>62</sup>

Here and elsewhere in our focus groups, discussion of the practical limits of people’s capacity to act on the ‘ethical’ demands being addressed to them as ‘consumers’ (i.e. of whether they *can* act ‘responsibly’) develops into an explicit consideration of whether all this is their responsibility at all (i.e. into a reflection on whether these things *should* be matters of personalised responsibility at all). Or, to put it another way, we see here people delineating the scope of their own activities that they feel able and willing to subject to certain sorts of moral reflexivity. Sometimes, people cope with the moralised address surrounding consumption by adopting rhetorical modes of irony, denial, regret, excuse-making, or justification, all of which leave the content of the moral demands unchallenged. But sometimes we can catch them contesting the idea that consumption habits should be regarded as bearing these sorts of moral burdens in the way that is increasingly expected of them. One could easily interpret this as a means by which people displace and deny responsibilities that they should, ideally, be willing to acknowledge. That’s what lots of policy and academic research is inclined to do. But this seems to us to be a response that itself evades what might be most challenging about these sorts of ‘opinions’ and ‘attitudes’, which are after all often well-informed and carefully reasoned. In much of this talk, there is an implication that the ascription of *responsibility to consumers* is neither practically coherent nor normatively justifiable in quite the obvious way that many ‘experts’ have come to assume.

## **5). Conclusion: Whose ‘Responsibility’?**

In this chapter, we have suggested that, try as we might, it’s actually quite difficult to find the archetypal individualised, rational, egoistical consumer idealised by rational choice

theorists and bemoaned by critics as an unwelcome sociological fact. You can't actually find them in pure form even in what is supposed to be 'best-case' neoliberal policy discourse – there you find individual consumers burdened with all sorts of responsibilities to act virtuously for the common good. You certainly can't find them in the discourses and campaigns of consumer activists, development charities, and sustainability think-tanks, who come up with creative models of consumer choice which are likewise overflowing with all sorts of social, publicly minded virtues. Between them, this set of actors combine to frame consumption as bearing all sorts of moral burdens – as an arena saturated with questions of responsibility. When you do empirical work on 'consumers', you don't find the mythical consumer either; people talk about their consumption habits and their roles as consumers as an *attribute* of their identities as mums and dads and sons and daughters and brothers and sisters and friends and lovers and workmates and bosses and comrades; as Christians and Socialists, Councillors and Counsellors, Teachers and Pensioners.

We have argued that choice has become an object of 'government', and of public debate more broadly, by being problematized in a register of responsibility. This means that narratives of neoliberalism, individualization, and the like should be treated with some scepticism. Consumer choice, these days, comes with all sorts of responsibilities attached: to be healthy and nice to others, to care about distant strangers and future generations and trees and birds. Far from being constituted as a realm of amoral self-interest, contemporary practices and discourses of consumption and consumerism are utterly saturated in moral significance. They seek to 'make up persons' that should be, it appears, capable of choosing wisely and magnanimously in the interests of all sorts of others. But there is no single, overarching 'neoliberal' model of individualized, egoistical choice being projected; consumer choice is wrapped around with all sorts of collective and inter-subjective responsibilities.

Caught between the idea that providing information to individual consumers is a way of enabling them to act on their own preferences for more responsible futures, and the idea that changing consumer behaviour might require more than just providing lots of

information, what remains difficult for research concerned with governing consumption is to imagine people as *citizens* in anything other than the most perfunctory sense. This marks a failure of imagination in a research field that continues to conceptualise the political field as a realm of policy, regulation, and governmentality, rather than one of mobilisation, participation, and contestation. A great deal of research on contemporary consumption focuses on questions of *whose* responsibility it should be to act to reduce harmful patterns of behaviour: are the key agents of change consumers, or governments, or business, or the media, or NGOs, or professional bodies or religious bodies?<sup>63</sup> As we have already suggested, what policy- and governance- oriented research seems unable to acknowledge – unable to hear – is the degree to which citizens, not consumers, are able to articulate sceptical questions about just *whose definition of responsibility* comes to dominate public discussion and insinuate itself into their own practices through diverse mediums of the ethical problematization of everyday consumption.

We think it might be worth pausing awhile to ponder this question of *whose responsibility* it is that shapes public discourse around the problems of consumption. It suggests two lines of critical investigation that might reorient questions of consumption and governance in a more citizenly, democratic direction. Firstly, the question of *whose responsibility* suggests a line of political investigation. We have already seen that this form of intervention actively contests the scope of ‘permissible paternalism’ upon which state regulation of markets can be justified. But while it is relatively straightforward to come up with a justification of which preferences should be respected and which ones not, this is not the same as determining which other actors are ‘systematically better judges’ of people’s interests in those circumstances.<sup>64</sup> And this question is particularly pertinent in the field of ethical and sustainable consumption, one defined by various forms of hard and soft expertise (from expertise about climate change to expertise about people’s most inner motivations). Secondly, the question of *whose responsibility* suggests a line of ethical investigation. We have argued that the key question is not whether consumption is ‘ethical’ or ‘moral’ or ‘political’ or not: rather, what remains to be thought, when it comes to the analysis of consumption, is whether ‘responsibility’ is the only virtue that it is worth cultivating.

It is these two themes that run across the doubts and scepticism, the irony and humour expressed by our focus groups participants when put on the spot about the ethics of their own consumption behaviour. Perhaps they are struggling to articulate some doubts about the democratic validity of the experts who claim to know their interests better than they do but so often refuse to address them as citizens. And perhaps they are struggling to articulate a sense of the good life that cannot be reduced to the pieties of contemporary 'global responsibility'.

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### **Acknowledgements**

Research reported in this paper was supported by an ESRC/AHRC Cultures of Consumption Programme grant: 'Governing the subjects and spaces of ethical consumption', RES 143250022.

## NOTES

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