

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

ProblematISING practices: Authors' response

Journal Item

How to cite:

Barnett, Clive; Clarke, Nick and Cloke, Paul (2013). ProblematISING practices: Authors' response. *Area*, 45(2) pp. 260–263.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2013 The Authors

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1111/area.12027>₄

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's [data policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

This is the pre-publication submitted version of the following article: Barnett, C. et al (2013), Problematizing practices: authors' response. *Area* 45:2, 260-263.

We would like to thank both Alex Hughes and Mike Goodman for their careful engagements with the argument presented in *Globalizing Responsibility*, and also Mark Whitehead for his work in organising the Authors meet Critics session at the RGS-IBG annual meeting in 2011 and this Review Forum. Throughout the life of the research project from which the book emerges, Alex and Mike have been sometimes anonymous, sometimes real and embodied critical interlocutors, who have forced us to clarify and justify our positions.

Our book was not meant to say everything about ethical consumption or related topics. It was meant as a contribution to the analysis of contemporary political rationalities, which took ethical consumption as its empirical focus, not least because this field seemed both exemplary of wider trends and to be a field of organisational innovation in its own right. Our entry point was, then, not to think of consumption as the end-use moment in a chain or circuit that takes in production, exchange and distribution; it was to think of consumption as a field of political mobilisation. And we also intended the book to be an *argument*: it stakes out some positions, challenges some orthodoxies, and attempts to persuade readers that some of our own avenues of enquiry might be worth pursuing further.

Alex Hughes captures the conceptual premise of the book, revolving around how best to conceptualise the forms of agency involved in the emergence of ethical consumption, and linking this to the themes of problematization and practice. Problematization, which serves as the master-frame of our analysis, is an idea we stole from a selective reading of Foucault, which we came to find more useful than notions of 'governmentality' or 'biopower' because it opens up a field of enquiry rather than providing the keys to over-interpretation. As an approach, it

led us to suspend some of the obviousness that surrounded much of the policy, campaign and academic discussion of ethical consumption – not least, the assumption that this whole field was all about ‘the consumer’, for good or ill. It directed our attention to the ways in which ‘the ethical consumer’ is an effect of motivated political strategies and repertoires of a variety of government, corporate, and civic actors. In treating ethical consumption in this way as a field of strategic action (see Fligstein and McAdam 2011), we focussed much of our attention on the agency of campaigning organisations in particular. But we also tried hard to listen to what those people ‘formerly-known’ as consumers, as Goodman nicely puts it for us, seemed to think was important when they responded to our questions, and tried as hard as we could not to assume that they were thinking the wrong things. That is what we seek to articulate methodologically and conceptually in the book in the discussion of ‘grammars of responsibility’. It is linked, in our view, to thinking of grand issues such as citizenship in terms of more or less mundane ‘acts’ that people feel more or less empowered, more or less motivated to undertake in relation to different issues of concern.

Practice theory has become influential in a range of areas of geographical research, and certainly has taken on central importance in consumption studies. The programme of which our project was one small part, the ESRC/AHRC Cultures of Consumption Programme, might well have been an important intermediary in the diffusion of practice-based understandings of consumption – key theorists of this approach such as Allan Warde, Elizabeth Shove, and Dale Sotherton were part of the collective orchestrated by the programme. What we found as we undertook empirical work on how consumption was problematized by campaign organisations was that this was a field in which certain sorts of understandings of consumption-as-practice were already circulating. There was an identifiable sense of exhaustion amongst campaigners and activists with the overwhelming focus on ‘the consumer’, on end-use consumption, and on information-led campaigns. Campaign strategies and repertoires of mobilization were innovating around attempts to address whole practices: by shifting attention ‘upstream’ (to enrol procurement officials or buyers for large high-

street retailers with the power to shift supply-chain practices); by seeking modes of personal address that were more sensitive to people's identifications than those implied by thinking of them as 'consumers'; or in particular by seeking to enrol people not as individuals but as members of other collectives, such as churches, or schools, or places. In a sense then, we found ourselves 'applying' the conceptual frame of practice theory to a field in which this same frame already seemed to be applied by strategic actors. Somewhere in that loop there might perhaps be scope for investigating 'the social life of theories'?

Between them, both Hughes and Goodman indicate that it is possible to theorise ethical consumption through other conceptual registers to those we focussed on. Some of these approaches may be more easily integrated to the perspective we have developed than others. But there are also different models of critical vocation at work in this field of research, so we want to say a little about both of these questions.

One issue that Hughes raises is the need to 'take more seriously the materiality of ethical consumption'. This is an important point, although it does perhaps beg the question of just what this call means. There might be a danger in missing the practice-shaped wood by focussing on the differentiating materiality of each individual tree. There is no doubt plenty of scope for thinking about the difference that the qualities of different objects of consumption make to ethical consumption campaigns, although we suspect that too often this emphasis remains centred on thinking about ethical consumption as a variant of *consumption*, rather than as a variant of *political action* as we preferred to do in the book. Thought of in the latter way, the materiality of this field extends far beyond the qualities of objects of consumption *per se*, to include the sorts of issues that Goodman has focussed on, for example, such as the role of media practices in articulating the ethical dimensions of commodity consumption. Our point, in short, is that 'materiality' might only be interesting as a focus when placed under the description of specific practices, which might well have some analytical priority. This is a hunch that follows from observing that the problem with all hitherto existing invocations of materiality is that they often tend to

presume that the interesting thing do to is to say something metaphysical about matter in general, rather than focussing on thinking more slowly about *how* matters matter.

Hughes also points to the importance of ‘postcolonial readings of consumption’, and we take this to mean that questions of context matter to how a theoretical framework such as the one presented in the book is deployed. We are pleased to endorse her sense that some of our approach might be usefully applied in other contexts – this follows from the focus on problematizations and organizational strategies for mobilisation and enrolment. This issue also relates to the point that both Hughes and Goodman raise about the locatedness of our study in Bristol. We do not think that Bristol is a particularly unusual place, in that social movement organisations in the field of ethical consumption operate in all sorts of places across the UK and beyond. Nor did we suggest anywhere that the political rationalities of ethical consumption stop at the city limits of Bristol – far from it, what we were concerned with was investigating the ways in which locality was mobilized to engage with more extensive networks. We certainly acknowledge that the historical moment of our project, the mid-2000s, was quite distinctive as a period in which New Labour policies provided various opportunities for certain sorts of campaigning initiatives around ethical consumption. This moment has passed, and those opportunities have been reconfigured. That is, though, a matter of further empirical enquiry, but again, we would hope that the approach that we developed is flexible enough to help frame such as enquiry in interesting ways.

But we would argue more strongly that place really matters to this style of politics. Mobilizing around place-based affiliations and loyalties is a crucial dimension of the political rationality of ‘global feeling’ exemplified by fair trade. And it is important, amongst other reasons, because it is one way of engaging unequally empowered people in a politics of solidarity that itself addresses issues of inequality. It also important to recognize the strategic dimension to this focus on Bristol: in the case of fair trade campaigning in particular, ‘scaling-up’ and translating place-based initiatives from small towns like Garstang or Stroud

to metropolitan areas like Bristol, or London, is an organizational challenge that provokes certain sorts of campaign innovations and movement transformations. In large-part, fair trade exemplifies a style of movement-building that seeks to articulate repertoires from place to place, a style one can also see for example in more recent Transition campaigns.

So, we want to take this opportunity to underscore what might well be an underplayed geographical lesson of the book: movements around 'global issues' often display a finely attuned sense of what Savage (2010, xiii) has called 'a landscaped conception of social change', one in which attachments to partial identities are seen as the routes and as providing resources for wider imaginations of belonging and solidarity, rather than seen as impediments to be overcome. As with the case of the use of practice-based ideas by campaigners, we take this to be an important *theoretical* lesson to be learnt from this field of non-academic thinking.

We want, in summary, to endorse the importance of the questions addressed to us by both Hughes and Goodman as further lines of enquiry – issues of materiality; questions of taking ethical consumption elsewhere, beyond the global North; of robust political-economic analysis of corporate retail power and social inequality; of the role of media and communications in integrating the whole complex of ethically-oriented consumption practices. These are all important issues, which require further empirical analysis no doubt, but also, as we have indicated, more conceptual thought as well. And here we do want to reiterate one final difference, one that turns on different understandings not so much of whether or not it's OK to be 'moralistic', but on different accounts of critical vocation. We have two related points to make. First, the series of critical challenges that Mike Goodman raises are serious ones. They are the sorts of critical concerns that circulate quite routinely within professional and activist fields of fair trade campaigning, sustainability, global trade justice movements, and related fields. Worries about mainstreaming, of selling-out, of hypocrisy, of challenging or supporting consumerism, and related problems are a quite fundamental dimension of how these fields of action are internally organized and

mutate. This does not invalidate the worries, although it does perhaps cause us to pause before using these same frames as automatic reference points for critical academic analysis. Second, Goodman's questions about 'the politics of ethical consumption' are also valid and serious. But we think that there is, when it comes to talk about 'the politics of' this or that phenomenon, a tendency to presume too quickly to know what a phenomenon actually is so that one can apply to it ready-made frames of critical judgment. What we have sought to do in *Globalizing Responsibility* is to pay attention to the structure of intentionality that shapes the emergence and reconfiguration of the field of ethical consumption campaigning. This seems to us to be a worthwhile exercise to undertake in advance of passing judgment, because this type of 'descriptive' undertaking might clarify the kinds of evaluative judgments one might then want to apply. So, for example, on our account the whole panoply of critical analysis associated with discussions of neoliberalism and the post-political simply mis-describes what is actually going on in this field. Foregrounding the investigation of contingent problematisations of economic life challenges conventional accounts of neoliberalization (see Collier 2012); thinking genealogically leads one to this in terms of how politics is reconfigured, rather than in terms of post-political conditions or depoliticization (see Gordon 2011).

In closing, we would like to thank Alex and Mike once again for arguing with us. We would not want for a moment to gainsay any of the nice things they say about the contribution of our book, nor to suppose that their more critical remarks are without merit – even if we don't agree with them all. Across the range of their responses to our book, they have articulated some of the diversity of theoretical approaches through which ethical consumption and related practices are now investigated; they have, in so doing, also made clear just how important conceptual commitments are in allowing us to apprehend objects of critical scrutiny; and above all, they have reminded us of how much we have learnt from others in the course of working on and around this book.