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**THESES**

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**Ethical Consumption as Public Participation**

Ph.D. Thesis

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## **I. Introduction**

The subject of the dissertation is the phenomenon of ethical consumption. Most studies dealing with ethical consumer behaviour and consumer movements simply define ethical consumption as *the conscious endeavor of the consumer to make their choices on the basis of their values or ethical principles*.

In the dissertation ethical consumption is identified by the observed behaviours along the altered categories developed by Cooper-Martin and Holbrook (1993), who compiled the following behavioral prototypes of ethical consumption: (1) non-consumption, (2) value loaded routine shopping, (3) boycott, (4) positive boycott (boycott), (5) careful usage and (6) placement after usage, disposal.

### ***Ethical consumption as public participation***

As a result of the theoretical research I have identified six, partly overlapping, but still discernable trends describing ethical consumption that from the 1990s evolved into an international

movement reflecting global problems. The different approaches explain ethical consumption as follows:

- (1) as the extension of rational consumer behavior, following self-interest (e.g. D'Astous and Legendre 2009, De Pelsmacker et al. 2006, Freestone and McGoldrick 2008, Harrison et al. 2005, Leigh et al. 1988, Sen et al. 2001, Shaw and Shiu 2002, Uusitalo and Oksanen 2004)
- (2) as a communication process of values (e.g. Adams and Raisborough 2008, Cherrier 2005 and 2007, Dombos 2008, Douglas 1996 and 1997, Douglas and Isherwood 1996, Lyon 2006);
- (3) as the (self) critique of consumption or consumer society (e.g. Kocsis 2002, Soper 2007);
- (4) as fair or ethically questionable consumer behavior (e.g. Muncy and Vitell 1992, Al-Khatib et al. 1996, Chatzidakis et al. 2006, Phillips et al. 2005);
- (5) as responsible consumption, with the focus on altruist motivations (e.g. Anderson and Cunningham 1972, Antil 1984, Cooper-Martin and Holbrook 1993, Mohr et al. 2001, Miller 2001, Székely 2003, Freestone and McGoldrick 2008, Shaw et al. 2005, Watson 2006, Webster 1975);

(6) as political consumption, social governance (e.g. Andersen and Tobiasen 2004, Beck 2005, Beck 2006b, Clarke et al. 2007, Dickinson and Carsky 2005, Dickinson and Hollander 1991, Gáti 2009, Goig 2007, Halkier and Holm 2008, Holzer and Sørensen 2003, Koos 2011, Micheletti 2003, Nelson et al. 2007, Shaw 2007, Schudson 2006, Youde 2009).

The dissertation joins the traditions of the latter (6) approach due to the following reason. Even though one of the most influential and detailed contemporary social theory, Ulrich Beck's reflexive modernisation and subpolitics theory, provide an excellent base and conceptual framework, so far sociology has not paid serious attention to the explanation of the participatory motivations of consumption. The aim of the presented research is to contribute to the sociological research of the political drivers of ethical consumption.

Scholars who interpret value-oriented consumption as political consumption stress the pressurizing nature of ethical consumption, seeing consumers not just as market players, but as political actors as well.

Some researchers focus on the supply side and study the various market institution of political consumption, such as product

schemes, ethical investment, product labelling and stewardship initiatives. Others refer to the interrelatedness of political and ethical consumer attitudes and provide micro-scale empirical evidences (Andersen and Tobiasen 2004, Clarke et al. 2007, Gáti 2009, Halkier and Holm 2008, Klein et al. 2002, Koos 2011, Low and Davenport 2007, Nelson et al. 2007, Shaw 2007).

Ulrich Beck's reflexive modernisation and subpolitics theory (Beck 2003, 1997a, 2005) describes the micro-level phenomenon from a macrosociological perspective. The theory provides coherent evaluation of the political consequences of the changing environmental attitudes and of the (side)effects of globalisation. More over Beck uses several times consumers and consumer movements as points of reference in his studies.

Thus the preliminaries of the dissertation are the micro-level studies of the ethical consumption as political consumption approach, and it applies Beck's reflexive modernisation and subpolitics theory as an analytical framework.

### ***Research question***

The research question of the dissertation is as follows: *can the phenomenon of ethical consumption be interpreted as a kind of*

*political participation?* The answer is derived from the verification of two hypotheses:

- (1) The motivations of ethical consumption include the wish to contribute to changes in important issues for the consumer and for his or her environment (Andersen and Tobiasen 2004, Clarke et al. 2007, Halkier and Holm 2008, Klein 2002, Low and Davenport 2007, Shaw 2007).
- (2) Ethical consumers are politically active, that means
  - (a) they practice other political activities (Clarke et al. 2007, Gáti 2009, Nelson et al. 2007, Koos 2011, Schor and Willis 2009)
  - (b) they are open to and interested in politics (Nelson et al. 2007)
  - (c) they actively discuss their political views with others (Nelson et al. 2007)

The hypotheses are founded in the empirical evidences of the political consumption research trend (see above) and in the sociological approach that explains consumption as a communicative and interpretive process (Douglas and Isherwood 1996).

The first hypothesis reflects the following theoretical statements of Beck: (1) the subpoliticized society is a civil society that takes its concerns into its own hands in all areas and fields of actions of society (1997a), (2) the ideas of democracy were internalized to such an extent that enabled politics to penetrate to all areas of private life (Beck 1997a, 2003), (3) citizens/consumers perceive the negative side effects of economic globalisation (Beck 1998).

Studies that consider instrumental motivations as the main characteristics of ethical consumption and describe it as political consumption also contributed to the theoretical foundation of the hypothesis. Finally, analyses that provided empirical evidences of the instrumental nature of ethical consumption also supported the articulation of this hypothesis (e.g. Klein et al. 2002, Andersen and Tobiasen 2004, Halkier and Holm 2008, Shaw 2007).

Regarding that various motivations may drive consumer decisions and these are born from the interactions of several conditions, the empirical research also inquires on other motivations besides participation that drive ethical consumption. What are those motivations and how they are interconnected? Are there motivations that are dominant over the others? Thus the research examines whether taking responsibility, social image, belonging,



convenience, price rationality, health motivations are among the drivers of ethical consumption.

The second hypothesis reflects the following theoretical statements of Beck: (1) subpolitisation is followed by the renaissance of political participation in the forms of a new political culture (civil society initiatives, social movements) (Beck 2003). The empirical preliminaries of the hypothesis are those researches that pointed to the political activity of the ethical consumers, and to the correlation between ethical consumption and other forms of participation (e.g. Clarke 2007, Gáti 2009, Nelson et al. 2007, Koos 2011, Schor and Willis 2009)

By the justification of this hypothesis I will highlight that ethical consumption motivated by instrumental intentions is also correlating with other forms of participation, hence it is a part of a rich participatory culture of politically active citizens.

As a part of the analyses I also examined other preferences for participation of the ethical consumers. One of the potential reasons of their increased political activity, is that while ethical consumers do not trust the efficiency of political institutions (Holzer and Sørensen 2003, Micheletti 2003), they are committed to democratic ideas and practices (Beck 2003). Thus I also examined the views of ethical-political consumers about the trust

in the institutions of representative democracy and in corporative actors, and about how they see the political influence of these actors.

It may not seem to be too ambitious to answer solely one research question with two parts. But it should be taken into consideration, that in 2004, at the beginning of the doctoral researches, with the exception of some historical studies mentioning patriotic consumption, there was no researches about ethical consumption in Hungary, and there were no relevant publications. As far as I know only two *theoretical* academic papers were published up to that date: Zsolt Boda's study about the interpretations of fair trade in 2002, and Mózes Székely's introduction to the topic in 2003. The empirical studies of Tamás Dombos (2008) and Annamária Gáti (2009) were published recently, and only the latter examined the correlation between ethical consumption (more precisely boycotts) and political participation. The majority of the international researches were also published in the past decade. Therefore the dissertation was also meant to present the state of art and traditions of ethical consumption in Hungary: in this sense this is an innovative research. The dissertation also provides a systematic overview about the relevant researches of the past

decades, and discusses their concepts and results. As far as I am informed only few authors took this challenge even on the international scene (I have to mention Brinkmann [2004] and the editorial of the Journal of Consumer Behaviour 2007/6 as exceptions). And finally I have to emphasise that the first *sociological* examinations of ethical consumption were also published only in the recent years (e.g. Adams and Raisborough 2008, Caruana 2007b, Koos 2011, partly Holzer and Sørensen 2003).

## **II. Methods**

There are three empirical chapters in the dissertation. The first aims at the systematic introduction of ethical consumption patterns in Hungary. It collects and presents data from various Hungarian surveys that demonstrate the penetration and the support of the different ethical consumption values and practices. After, I applied quantitative methods to present the correlation between the ethical consumption and political participation attitudes. In 2005 I had the chance to lead a national representative survey of the Association of Conscious Consumers. I was responsible for elaborating the research design and the

questionnaire, the field work was carried out by the Hungarian Gallup Institute. The questions of the survey proved to be appropriate for the hypotheses testing. Based on the survey questions concerning consumer attitudes, I developed a simplified, soft profile of the ethical consumer, following which I compared the corresponding cases with all the others in respect of political attitudes. The analyses did not intend to discover casualities, therefore and due to the low number of cases, I used contingency tables. Although the majority of the results are statistically significant and correspond the literature, due to the low number of cases and to the limitations of the sample (i.e. it was not taken from the population of ethical consumers) I conducted further researches.

In 2009 I made structured interviews with 27 ethical consumers. The interview method was also justified by the inventory nature of the research. On the other hand qualitative methods provided useful means to discover the motivations of ethical consumers and how they perceive their ethical consumption practices.

As there is no information on the characteristics of the ethical consumer population in Hungary, I assured the reliability of the results by sampling from those consumers who embodied the ideal

type of the ethical consumer. The third empirical chapter introduces the results of the interviews.

### **III. Research results**

The first empirical research provided an overview about the relevance of ethical consumption in Hungary. I concluded that there are significant supportive attitudes towards boycotts, but this is not reflected in actions as shown by the low number of boycott calls after the millennium. The most popular and potential boycott causes are environmental concerns, patriotism, workers' solidarity and consumer affairs. Value loaded routine shopping is present through the wide-spread positive attitudes towards buying local food produce, but only some isolated groups are informed about fair trade and buy such goods. People are not open to reduce their consumption for environmental or social reasons, except some isolated groups. Such mediated and widely discussed behaviours as selective waste collection or reuse have huge social support.

As a results of the quantitative research I came to the below conclusions. Compared to the majority, consumers with ethical consumer attitudes:

- Were much more likely to consider important the participation in political elections, and were more likely to attribute significance to the use of traditional participative forms of representative democracy.
- Despite assigning them importance, they were less likely to consider participation in parliamentary elections as an efficient tool for enforcing their interests and expressing their opinions.
- Were more likely to consider boycotts, social forums and dialogues, methods closer to the institutions of direct democracy, as an efficient tool for enforcing their interests and expressing their opinions.

The qualitative research verified that public participation is one of the significant motivations of ethical consumption.

- When explained the goals of their consumer decisions ethical consumers mentioned the wish to contribute to the solutions of wider social issues. The support of local communities, protecting the environment, globalisation

critique, cultural protest are manifest in their consumer decisions.

- Ethical consumers perceive their behaviour as an alternative to the globalisation and as the mitigation of the negative side effects of globalisation.
- Ethical consumers have future-oriented dispositions: they believe that they contribute to a more environmentally sustainable future and fair society through their consumer decisions.

Concerning the political activity of ethical consumers the qualitative research came to the following conclusions and supported the above results:

- Ethical consumers are politically active, distinguish between the various participation methods and have sophisticated views about them.
- It was verified again, that they find the voting on elections important, but they find the methods closer to the institutions of direct democracy more efficient to express their opinions and to enforce their interests.
- Ethical consumers trust protest organisations and civil society organisations, while they distrust business

organisations more than the majority of the society. They trust those organisations, that may contribute to the realisation of environmentally and socially favourable futures, while they distrust those whose operation is based on selfish or profit interests.

Thus ethical consumers consciously articulate certain environmental and social values through their decisions, and they interpret them as contributions to important changes: they are active political actors as citizens and as consumers. The above results verify the hypotheses.

According to Beck's political theory ethical consumers or the ethical consumer movement may be conceptualised as subpolitics (see also Holzer and Sorensen 2003):

- Beck states, that environmental risks are side effects of the successes of modernization and became powerful influencing factors of social and political changes (2003). Certain subpolitical actors perceive the negative side effects of economic globalisation (Beck 1998), and they have critical attitudes towards them. Globalisation critique reflecting



environmental sustainability, solidarity and fairness is among the major driving forces of ethical consumption.

- The penetration of democratic ideas and practices is one of the preconditions of subpolitisation. Reflexive democratisation and subpolitisation also means the renaissance of political participation in the forms of a new political culture (Beck 2003). As the presented research concluded ethical consumers are politically active, distinguish between the various participation methods and have sophisticated views about them. Comparing with the majority of the society ethical consumers are more committed to voting on elections and to methods closer to the institutions of direct democracy.
- One of the important characteristics of subpolitics is that previously unpolitical decisions become political (Beck 2003). The empirical research showed that ethical consumers perceive some of their decisions as at least partial solutions to “world problems”, and as alternatives to the globalisation, and as contribution to favourable social changes.
- One of the important mobilising factors of subpolitics is the distrust in political and corporate actors (Beck 1995, 2003, 2005, JCC 2001). Ethical consumers, as subpolitics, blame the corporate sector for the acute environmental and social

problems, and on the other hand they question the competence of political actors to meet these challenges and to realise an environmentally and socially sustainable future.

- On the other hand the political – governing – power of subpolitics derives from the moralisation of consumption and the self organisation of consumer movements. Consumers moralize consumption and this way reconnect private (economic) and public spheres disconnected by reflexive modernization. That means that economic activity can assure economic success only if it perceives and takes seriously public influences, anticipating and integrating them into corporate decisions (Beck 1997). Empirical evidences support the idea that ethical consumers moralise their consumption. They talk about “good” and “bad” consumption, they think that “good” consumption should be a norm.

Both empirical and theoretical results prove the participatory nature of ethical consumption.

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