Consumption – between Aesthetics and Ethics. A Discussion

Dénes TAMÁS
Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Cluj-Napoca
tamasdenes@uni.sapientia.ro

Laura NISTOR
Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Cluj-Napoca
nistorlaura@uni.sapientia.ro

Abstract. The article discusses some problems connected to ethical consumption. We aimed to show that in spite of the fact that many researches consider ethical consumption as a taken-for-granted phenomenon which can be rooted in specific values and behaviours, there is not clearly revealed the exact content of this concept. In order to clarify such questions, we tried to answer how consumption became an ethical question, what kind of problems consumption implies, and which are those major ethical frameworks within which consumption can be translated. We concluded that the ethics of consumption cannot be placed anymore within the references of modernity. Following Bauman's aesthetics of consumption, we think that ethical consumption is a kind of aesthetics based on a diffuse set of values and becomes interpretable only in the framework of postmodern ethics.

Keywords: consumption, ethics, postmodernism, morality

Introduction

It is already a commonplace that we live in a society of consumption. The scholarly literature on consumption is extremely rich and everyday journalism is also full of texts dealing with the phenomenon of consumption. As a consequence, nowadays, consumption can be approached in very different ways, giving rise to complex theories and ideologies of consumption. Following Gabriel and Lang (2003: 8–9), five major approaches of consumption can be mentioned: consumerism as a moral doctrine – according to which consumerism is the essence of the good life and the vehicle for freedom, power, and happiness; consumerism as the ideology of conspicuous consumption –, meaning that consumption is the mechanism by

which social status can be defined and enhanced; consumerism as an economic ideology – in which consumption is the source of economic well-being, so that the nurturing of consumers is the key to economic development; consumerism as a political ideology –, which refers to the politicization of consumption both in terms that the state guarantees consumer rights and in terms that the state is a major provider of goods, services, and quality-related standards; consumerism as a social movement, which refers to consumer advocacy, not only in the form of quality-related concerns but also in the form of criticizing overconsumption in a world of finite resources.

A careful analysis of such approaches shows that in any of them consumption is frequently discussed in a negative manner, especially when references are made to the so-called hedonistic or conspicuous consumption, i.e. the act of consumption for self-indulgence and status-enhancement. Such viewpoints talk about a moral panic and assume that in the society of consumption we are witnessing the devaluation and moral wrecking of society. In the light of such aspects, it seems reasonable to assume that the critique of the society of consumption appeared earlier than its theory (i.e. the work of the Frankfurt School).

In any case, the phenomenon of consumption, which is frequently dealt with in the contexts of incomes and professions (i.e. who, what, and why consumes), represents an important social structuring force. In accordance with Bauman (2005), today's society shapes its members for the fulfilment of their consumer roles. Or, as Clarke D. B. et al. (2003) contend in the introduction of *The Consumption Reader*, in today's society of consumption, it has become more important how one spends than how one earns his/her money. Thus, in the modern world, consumption can be considered that major force through which social relations are organized, identities are defined, and social interactions take place. Values are not the factors determining consumption, but they are articulated through consumption (cf. Slater 1997).

In the present article, we aim to reflect on the ethics of consumption, on the ways 'how' we consume. The ethical dimension of consumption started to become an important section of consumption-related theories in the 1990s. Since then, and mostly connected to the *Ethical Consumer Research Association* (ECRA) and to the related *Ethical Consumer* magazine, the concept of 'ethical consumer' gathered ground. This does not mean only that consumption-related discourses started to be impregnated by moralizing accents, but it refers also to conscious consumer attitudes, assuming that consumption decisions are or should be made on the ground of certain moral concerns and values. On the basis of such attitudes and decisions, we can speak also about 'ethical consumption', meaning that value-based, conscious consumer attitudes are taking place not only on the level of certain individuals but they also take the form of community-level actions or even macro-level social manifestations. Bauman (1992) talks in this

sense about 'neo-tribes', and contends that in the era of postmodernism ethical consumers are one of those lifestyle groups which propagate several forms of alternative consumption. Such consumption collectives can be perceived as identity movements which manifest themselves through certain values, ways of consumption, and even visible objects like clothing (cf. Wilska 2002).

Without intending to go into a detailed description of ethical consumption, we mention here only that ethical consumption can be conceptualized as a consumer philosophy which refers to the degree to which consumers prioritize their own values and concerns when they make shopping decisions. The moral values which underline ethical consumption are various, but, in general, they can be divided into two major groups: values that concern the self and values that concern others (e.g. the environment or other people) or, as Carrier (2012) puts it, the decision to start consuming ethically can be taken with respect to oneself or it can reflect a desire to become part of a social movement; ethical consumption can be about a better household and/or about a better world. In the same logic, it can be said that ethical consumption satisfies three kinds of needs: control needs, i.e. the necessity of people to have control over everyday activities and over their fears (e.g. certain foods, brands, ingredients, etc. to avoid); social integration needs, i.e. the desire to feel part of a group (e.g. of a movement); authenticity needs, i.e. the search for genuine, natural, eco-friendly products (Lang, 2009: 2).

No matter what the ground of ethical consumption would be, consumers may be different in the ways they express their shopping moral: they can simply buy products which are not harmful to society or the environment, but they can also be involved in more complex and committed social behaviours like boycotting products (Lang 2009: 2). Indeed, ethical consumption comprises various forms of practices, which all illustrate that the concept can be considered an umbrella term for 'softer' or 'harder' consumer practices. In this sense, Gulyás (2008) lists the following forms of consumption practices: non-consumption, which refers to avoiding shopping as much as it is possible; value-based regular shopping, i.e. the regular purchase of fair, green, local, etc. products; boycott – i.e. the refusal of buying from a certain producer because of dissatisfaction with the producers' environmental, social, etc. performance; buycott (positive boycott) – i.e. purchasing products from producers which support a particular case; specific forms of product usage and after usage disposal which cares for others and the environment (e.g. saving, recycling, selective waste collection, etc.).

It is easy to see that in contemporary societies certain consumption choices can work as forms of political protest and shopping can be considered a political act (Sassatelli & Davolio 2010: 205). Besides this, it is also quite self-evident that ethical consumption implies a bio-ethical and an ecological component, and thus environmental ethics is an important pivot in constructing the arguments of ethical consumption.

But how coherent such arguments are? If we deeply analyse the discourse around consumption, it becomes quite difficult to define the genuine ethical consumption. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the ethical discourses have centred on the concept of duty, and thus ethics has been slackened. This phenomenon is signalled, among others, by the works of Gianni Vattimo, Gilles Lipovetsky, Zygmunt Bauman, etc., i.e. those authors who contributed the most to the elaboration of the postmodern ethics. In the same time, there appeared empirical works which defined themselves as documents of social and value change. In this sense, we can make reference to Richard Sennett's *The Fall of the Public Man* (1977), Fukuyama's *The Great Disruption. Human Nature and the Reconstruction of Social Order* (1999), etc.

From the perspective of our article, Zygmunt Bauman's work titled *From the Work Ethic to the Aesthetic of Consumption* (2005) is extremely indicative since the author juxtaposes the ethics of work and the ethics of consumption. In fact, the title of our article gets its reason from this antithesis. When Bauman puts the ethics of work against the ethics of consumption, he contends that within the framework of the society of consumption modernity's major ethical values centred around duty and responsibility started to lose their validity. In the society of consumption, those panoptical institutions (e.g. hospitals, schools, army, etc.) which are the most responsible for the spreading of the work-centred moral of modernity do not exist in their generic forms or they have only limited structuring power and have been replaced by the aesthetics of consumption. This means that consumers are aesthetical subjects whose decisions are motivated by strategies of identity constructions, rather than moral subjects who act in accordance with their duties and responsibilities (see also Venkatesh & Meamber 2008: 46).

In this context, can we speak about 'ethics of consumption' or is it more appropriate to make reference to the more unobtrusive 'ethical consumption'? To what extent can we call ethics the many approaches which try to bring morale to today's consumption? Can such approaches step out from the value matrix of the society of consumption, and establish a more general societal moral? In order to answer such questions, we need broad theoretical approaches.

Because it seems that the ethics of consumption cannot be placed and understood in accordance with the references of modernity, we assume that the most important step is to sketch the ethics of modernity vs the ethics of postmodernity. In order to understand this juxtaposition, it is necessary to observe how a certain social order develops and sustains its own values. It is not less important to outline the patterns of those ethical behaviours which appear within the framework of the so-called postmodern society. At the same time, it is not enough to make reference only to theoretical works. It is obvious that the real nature of the ethical consumption can be tackled in the effective practice of

consumption, so it is important to see which social strata and alongside what kind of values and motivations embrace ethical forms of consumption. Such aspects ask for sociological approaches, and we intend to make reference to them in the course of the following theoretical sections.

Consumption as an ethical question

The ethical problems of consumption represent a fairly new area of research. Until the middle of the 20th century, the question of consumption had been treated outside the ethical approaches. Modern ethics was centred around individuals' relationship with each other and with themselves. The question of consumption was marginal in such a universe where good and bad were mostly measured and judged in terms of interpersonal relationships. Obviously, consumption has always had such aspects which preoccupied normative thought. If we take for instance the case of food consumption, it is well-known that in traditional-religious societies people succeeded to anchor themselves through the practice of eating. In the pre-modern societies, the act of eating took place within the geographical conditions of a certain location, and there resulted particular 'foodscapes' (what, when, how to eat), which bounded the local community together (Bildtgard 2009). Later, nations and communities continued to define themselves through cultures of eating – a practice which continues to be visible even nowadays in the form of gastronomic cultures and specific cuisines.

Later, in the context of recourse shortages, the so-called hedonist consumption which propagates self-centred indulgence and pleasure providing became excessively criticized mostly on ecological grounds. This issue opened the door for debates in which consumption turned to be an ethical question. The vulnerability of natural resources determined ethical thinking to incorporate into the circle of ethical behaviour the human–nature relationship. In this sense, we can make reference to Hans Jonas, who in *Die verwandelten Natur das menschlchen Handelh* (1979) contends that the 'old' ethic is unable to reflect on humans' relationships with the non-human world. Consequently, he suggested the enlargement of the ethical thought on human–nature relationship as well, assuming that in this way we can protect nature and its vulnerability in front of threats coming from the part of humans.

Nature is mostly threatened by consumption itself. Goods and service exchanges rise exponentially, and result not only in the ubiquitous presence of goods and services but also in various forms of pollution and environmental damage. Besides the negative environmental impacts, consumption has other dark sides as well, i.e. child labour, black labour, unequal distribution of goods, etc. Besides these, the hedonistic, conspicuous aspects of consumption determined the need

for normative approaches of consumption. With other words, consumption became an ethical question, which, however, does not mean that we already have a crystal clear connection between consumption and ethics.

Ethical consumption or the ethics of consumption?

The question from this subtitle could be considered a word-play, but in reality it comprises a serious problem. This problem appears once we want to place the phenomenon of ethical consumption in a certain disciplinary framework. Is it enough to appeal to a sociological framework as the majority of empirical works do when analysing the cases and frequencies of value-based consumption practices? Such works usually end with some kind of categorization, which aims to delimit and describe specific lifestyle groups. However, the concept of 'ethical' suggests that besides the sociological framework we need a normative framework as well, which can be offered by an applied ethics. In fact, we should deliberate as to whether we can depart or not from the ethical consumption for somewhere where we can talk about the ethics of consumption, understood as a special area of general ethics. Such ethics has its reason of existence only when it is able to apply moral considerations to specific consumption situations, i.e. if it becomes able to elaborate the normative framework of consumption. But do we not expect too much from a phenomenon which, after all, becomes explainable in the context of the society of consumption?

The existence of ethical consumption and ethical consumer is not questioned by anyone. But the complexity of the situation is well illustrated by the extreme variety of denominations with which such consumption behaviours are described, i.e.: conscious consumption (Willis & Schor 2012), sustainable consumption (e.g. Southerton et al. 2004, Seyfang 2006), critical consumerism (e.g. Sassatelli 2006), quality-conscious consumption, price-conscious consumption (Ding et al. 2010), etc. Out of these, especially conscious consumption can compete with ethical consumption, and it may seem that the former comprises the latter. Similarly to conscious consumption – which presupposes the degree to which consumers prioritize their own values and concerns when they make shopping decisions –, ethical consumption presupposes in its own turn consumers' reflexivity in connection with their consumption decisions, but the major difference between these terms consists in the existence of the normative component in the case of ethical consumption. Thus, while conscious consumption presupposes consumers' awareness in connection with products, production processes, distribution, or impacts of goods (Willis & Schor 2012), ethical consumption comprises the reflexivity in connection with the impact of consumption on others. This *other* may be another individual or group, the future generation,

the environment, but it can also refer to economic considerations in connection with producers. The authors, who consider conscious and ethical consumptions as synonyms, are accentuating especially this others-focusing component of the consumption decisions. As a conclusion, ethical consumers are characterized by the fact that in their consumption decisions they accept and vindicate their adjudication about social fairness (Smith 1990). Such adjudication corresponds, in fact, to the responsibility in connection with others, and constitutes the most salient difference between self-conscious consumption and ethical (i.e. genuine conscious) consumption.[1]

There still remains the question whether we can label as 'unethical' those consumption choices which do not comprise the above mentioned others-oriented consciousness? How can we label the consumption of goods produced with child labour, the consumption of non-ecological goods, etc.?

This problem becomes as much complex as there is a common wisdom sustained by market literature according to which the cost of products is a major factor in participating in ethical consumption practices. As far as organic, local, ecological, etc. products are usually more pricy than conventional products, it seems logical to find more numerous better-educated and affluent people among conscious food consumers. Johnston et al. (2011) recognize that ethical consumption practices are more specific among economic elites, but they also note that the simple dichotomy between rich/ethical and poor/unethical is problematic both politically and empirically. On the political level, such a dichotomy presupposes that moral virtues are specific for economically privileged people, and such a rationale determines the moral marginalization of the economically less better-off citizens. As an empirical argument for this discussion, the authors quote a qualitative study made among Canadian wealthy and less wealthy families, in which they found that wealth goes hand in hand with ethical consumption, knowledge and practice, but low income does not mean immoral eating practices: less wealthy families usually use less discursive repertories about ethical eating, but in practice they adapt ethical consumption practices to their resources (e.g. in the form of recycling).[2]

In spite of these important viewpoints, there still exists a drawn game in connection with ethical consumption. After all, the problem arises from the connection between consumption and ethics in the context of the society of

---

1   Conscious consumption as a form of reflexive modernization is frequently considered a form of self-indulgence, a form of personal and family healthcare, without amounting – or at least not consciously – to an ethical consumption or to a political statement (e.g. Szasz 2007).

2   In this respect, Starr (2009) opposes two trends. The former assumes that as far as ethical products are more expensive than normal products the buying of such products raises with the income. On the other hand, some ethical consumption practices (e.g. recycling, commuting via public transport) are sometimes intensive in time rather than in money, and so such practices tend to decline with income.

consumption, within which ethical consumption seems to represent only a small niche among the general moral of consumption and consumerism. Such aspect calls for the need to oppose the ethics of modernity and postmodernity and to try a reinterpretation of the ethics of consumption within the framework of the postmodern society.

The ethics of modernity

The ethics of modernity comprises highly diversified approaches which have been developed during centuries and through the works of many scholars; therefore, it is very difficult to epitomize it. In such an endeavour, it is plausible to depart from *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 1905), whose major thoughts are – even if criticized – accepted by major scholars. In this work, Weber explains the emergence and development of the capitalist system (i.e. the system which can be considered the framework of modernity) through the spreading of the Protestant work ethic able to establish such kind of lifestyle and ethos which are based on the norm of duty. In Weber's approach, the Protestant-ethic-based life conduct encouraged professional employment, tenure and monetary recovery rooted in workmanship.

Another important feature of Weber's approach consists in the placement of *duty* and *rationality* in the centre of the new moral. Gilles Lipovetsky in the *Le Crépuscule du devoir* (1993) considers also that duty and rationality are the central elements of the ethics of modernity. In Lipovetsky's view, modernity is the era of enlightenment, a watershed after which ethical thought becomes radically changed. Lipovetsky differentiated between traditional, religious and modernist, duty-centred morals. He speaks about the secularization of ethics, a phenomenon which occurs between 1750 and 1950 and which consists in the disappearance of the religious overtone from the ethics of duty. This is an era which accepts only rationalist authority, and the duty towards individuals replaces the duty towards God. In this era, the practical rationality aims to develop those moral norms which are accepted by anyone. This change is mostly evident in Kant's ethic, which assumes that the ethical subject and its autonomy are possible even without the supposition of God.

The powerful concept of duty could be only a philosophical artefact without the existence of those social practices which validate this moral. Lipovetsky (1996) accentuates that through approximately two centuries, until the middle of the 20th century, modern societies have been propagated citizens' moral duties by continuously encouraging them to live in accordance with duties towards each other and towards communities. Obviously, these calls would be unprofitable without the existence of such institutions which helped to vindicate them. We

are talking about the so-called panoptical institutions (Foucault 1995), which are based on dominance, social control, rationality, and impersonal power. The role of such institutions in building the social moral of modernity is accentuated by Bauman as well (2005), who contends that the transition from the society of producers to the society of consumers was possible by the gradual disappearance of these institutions. That kind of training which characterized panoptical institutions is not suitable to train the consumers of the society of consumption. The newly emerged situation implies, however, not only different and differently working institutions but also a new social moral. This means that the duty- and rationality-centred moral of modernity was gradually replaced by postmodern ethics and a kind of 'painless morality' (Lipovetsky 1992).

Postmodern ethics

Postmodern ethics – as Bauman (1993) contends – was born from the rejection of the typical, modernist approaches. While in the era of modernity moral authority could be ensured even without the presence of God and moral principles were not questioned, postmodern ethics is not able to rely upon universal and unchangeable principles since it is defined exactly on the basis of uncertainty. Bauman postulates that in the postmodern era there does not exist a singular moral code, and thus the existence of an objectively established ethics becomes practically impossible. The author contends that postmodern moral is not rational, it is rather aporetic and non-universal; thus, the moral self finds itself in an ambivalent, uncertain context within which universal moral answers only rarely appear.

Postmodern ethics builds on the knowledge that with the death of God human condition was not lost; instead, we became part of a thrilling experience whose aim is exactly the definition of human existence. During the course of this exercise, we cannot rely upon steady principles because in this postmodern world moral dilemmas and options are indeed dilemmas and options, and they do not constitute reparable effects originated in human weaknesses.

The uncertainty of moral principles goes hand in hand with the revaluation of the concept of duty. Gilles Lipovetsky (1996) considers this revaluation as the beginning of the emergence of post-duty, post-moral era, which stultifies the ideal of self-sacrifice and duty and, instead of these, propagates the norms of well-being. The hyperbolic imperative of virtue is replaced by the quality of life, personal achievement, and self-indulgence and moral prescriptions are replaced by subjective rights.

The social conditions of this turn can be found in the development of the welfare society. The increasing of leisure time, mobility, the institutional solution

of social conflicts, the growing standards of living allowed to focus not only on subsistence but also on the manner in which this new life is lived, i.e. on lifestyles. Within such context, it became obvious that social practice is not only a matter of prohibition, supervising, and dominance. Prohibitions became replaced by the principle of untrammelled self-realization, and this new ideal allowed to liberate hedonist motivations which hardly can be accommodated with the norms of rational life conduct.

Such changes resulted in the weakening of the concept of duty. It is important to mention that the new context does not exclude the existence of the new forms of 'painless' duties. As Lipovetsky (1996) contends, in the society of consumption, the logic of post-morality is dominant, but it is not the bare tendency of the postmodern era. In the post-duty society, the spirit of morality does not disappear but becomes manifest in the form of charity, humanitarian movements, or even in practices aimed to change the nature of jurisdiction. The moral touchiness of our era is mostly apparent in the form of pornography, abortion, protests against animal experiences and against the curtailment of human freedom. The era of post-morality is dominated by the requisites of rights and justice; however, such ethical requirements are supposed to be met without imposing duties on the individuals. This is what Lipovetsky calls the era of ethical minimalism.

In any case, duties are not convergent with consumption situations. In accordance with Bauman (2005), it is ideal that consumers not be attached too much to anything; commitments are not meant to last forever. Rather, commitments are intended to be volatile and periodic. For instance, brand commitment is much debated in the marketing literature, but scholars tend to agree that consumption incorporates a kind of excess and consumption capacity should go well beyond consumers' natural or learned necessities. Thus, consumers' needs can never be considered fully satisfied; consumers are always open and ready to consume newer and newer products and commitments to certain brands or products are only temporal.

As we have already mentioned, the ethics approached this turn by the concept of post-morality. Obviously, we can speak in parallel about the shift in values and worldviews. Inglehart's (1977) concept of post-materialism shows much similarities with Lipovetsky's concept of post-morality. While materialist values are built around social safety, post-materialistic values are focused on individuals' freedom, humanism, greater civic involvement, environmentalism, etc. Thus, post-materialist values are similar to the conduct of post-moral ethics, in the sense that both are supposing higher-level ethical and aesthetical principles. It can be concluded that the post-materialist value system maps exactly the ethical sensitivity of the era of post-morality. In fact, this could be the effective rationale of the postmodern turn occurring in the history of ethics.

Factors involved in ethical consumption

In the previous chapters, we tried to problematize the question of ethical consumption by focusing also on the unsatisfying deliberation on the term 'ethical'. Our point was that we cannot talk about ethics in connection with consumption in the absence of revealing the effective content and volume of the 'ethical' concept. The chapters dedicated to a short discussion on the modern and postmodern ethics aimed to make clear to some degree the origin and reason of existence of the term ethical consumption in the context of the society of consumption. We think, however, that the above theoretical discussions must be completed by empirical considerations aimed to answer the following questions: Who are the ethical consumers? What are those values which drive ethical consumption? To what degree can socio-demographic backgrounds explain ethical consumption? In the last few decades, there were conducted many empirical analyses in this regard, especially on the level of the Western world. In the following, we will sketch some of the conclusions of these studies.

In terms of the socio-demographic determinants of conscious/ethical consumption, it is difficult to find systematic effects of socio-demographic characteristics. In spite of these, there are certainly several tendencies which contour a more or less stable profile of the ethical consumer. To these variables, we should add the role of motivational and value factors based on which we can speak about the multifaceted profile of the ethical consumers (Guido 2010).

Concerning age, the assumption is that younger people – probably due to the fact that they have been educated more recently in the context of postmodern society – attach greater intrinsic value to ethical consumption. However, because they usually earn less than their older counterparts, the extra expenditure of conscious products may be relatively burdensome for them and, as a consequence, young people do not constitute the most dominant group of ethical consumers (Starr 2009). Based on the data of the General Social Survey, the author (ibidem) also concluded that living in a single-family dwelling, being white and female are associated with significantly higher probability of buying ethical food products. The author, however, did not find any effect of having children or being democrat/republican on ethical consumption. It is, however, notable that people who see themselves as relatively well informed about politics were more likely to buy ethically – a fact which seems to indicate the reflexive nature of conscious consumption.

In connection with the impact of the income, Koos (2012) contends that monetary resources can constitute a budget restriction for ethical consumption since such products have a premium price. However, he also notes that empirical results are rather inconclusive in this respect: while Micheletti and Stolle (2005) find a significant income effect on political consumption in Sweden, other studies report non-significant income effects, e.g. in Denmark (Goul Andersen &

Tobiasen 2004) or in Norway (Stromsens 2005). On the other hand, Harrison et al. (2007) contend that choosing ethical food is mediated by food costs, especially among low-income people, and we can say that ethical consumption is linked to the middle classes and it represents an elitist food culture. Guthman (2003) talks in this sense about 'yuppie chow' and suggests that ethical food consumption is largely linked to gentrification. Adams and Raisborough (2008) found a similar conclusion, and they consider that the ethical consumer is a middle-class person and ethical consumption is a middle-class project of distinguishing itself, so ethical consumption practices are an important aspect of identity construction in the case of middle-class people. Thus, in accordance with Bourdieu (1984), it seems that differences in consumption preferences and actual purchases still do exist, and even in the context of late modernity, when lifestyles are rather more chosen than ascribed, consumption is still very much embedded in social contexts and practices.

However, we must note that ethical consumption is not just a class project. Thus, Johnston et al. (2011) consider that besides economic resources, ethical consumption implies a specific value system and worldview. For instance, in the case of food, it seems that today's food culture is highly politicized since it presupposes the knowledge and discourse about which food is politically, environmentally, socially, etc. correct and citizens who are more aware about such discourses – and who might be better educated – are more dedicated consumers of such products, and so both material and symbolic factors are important shaping the forces of purchasing decisions.

In terms of the value systems, empirical studies showed that among universalism, benevolence, spirituality, and self-direction there are those values which are associated with ethical consumption, while among the motivations, concern over animal welfare, support for the local economy, and the perception of ethical consumption as a fashionable lifestyle are the most important issues which determine consumers to purchase ethically (Alwitt & Pitts 1996). However, there are also authors who found that environmental motivations explain only a small amount of the ethical purchase. In this respect, Lockie et al. (2002) consider also that environmental concern is just one of the motivations which lead consumers to ethical choices. In the case of food products, it has been shown that health and nutritional concerns are important motivations (Padel & Foster 2005), and this raises the question whether ethical consumption is really driven by moral concerns or – on the contrary – it is motivated by self-centred issues like concern for health.

In any case, it seems that the many contradictory findings of the research on ethical consumption show that traditional social factors, such as age, gender, education, etc., do not clearly determine this type of consumption. Neither socio-demographic backgrounds nor political orientation can unequivocally determine

the emergence of ethical consumption. However, all of these factors – under certain conditions – can be involved in the shaping of ethical consumption.

The edification of a certain ethics is not by far an act specified by a single factor; rather, it constitutes the result of a longer community-level process. It is always societal process which builds and sustains a specific social moral. Until this practice was determined by the socio-demographic background, such factors had had a major role in the creation of the social moral itself. For instance, being a woman had always meant a specific state and role in the case of traditional societies. Such role then determined specific choices which were connected to specific values and attitudes. Today, this is not the case: in modern societies, gender roles are fading and they do not clearly specify the different social constructs, among these the ethical consumption as well. But neither income nor political orientation can clearly indicate the emergence of the ethical consumption. In the light of the research data, ethical consumption seems to be a relatively freely floating situation and the theories of the society of consumption compel us to rethink our basic social categories.

Conclusions

The title of our article tried to polarize the problems connected to ethical consumption. We aimed to show that in spite of the fact that many researches consider ethical consumption as a taken-for-granted phenomenon which can be rooted in specific values and behaviours, the exact content of this concept is not clearly revealed. In order to clarify such questions, we tried to answer how consumption became an ethical question, what kind of problems the term 'consumption' implies, and which are those major ethical frameworks within which consumption can be translated.

In the course of this theoretical journey, we concluded that the ethics of consumption cannot be placed within the references of modernity anymore. Ethical consumption is not a way to express the unsparing, duty-centred imperatives of modernity. This occurs because those panoptical institutions which trained people to follow certain values are themselves disappearing. The ethics of work has always been attached to a certain social role and to the duties associated with this role. The subject of work ethics subordinated his/herself to his/her duties, and in this way succeeded to be a useful citizen. Contrary to this, a subject who consumes ethically does not temper his/herself in order to respect a certain moral imperative, but works on his/her self-enhancement and through his/her consumption decision tries to define his/herself as a valuable person. With this observation, we enter the terrain of postmodern ethics, which – in our opinion – can function as the most adequate framework for interpreting ethical consumption.

In the previous chapters, we outlined that the moral subject of ethical consumption is hard to be taken, both theoretically and empirically. This difficulty arises mostly from the methods of the traditional approaches, which try to clearly localize – e.g. along socio-demographic variables – ethical consumers. Another problem is related to the conceptualization of the ethics of consumption in the form of a traditional ethics, i.e. as a normative framework which regulates consumption. Consumption, however, is not a homogenous act and its moral problems and value-systems cannot be clearly outlined similarly to the professional ethics. There is also the question to what degree we can speak about consumer communities, since ethical consumption shows mostly as a loose community which occurs alongside different contexts, interests, and values and can have a temporal rather than permanent nature.

Ethical consumption does not show the value system of a certain social class; rather it offers an arena of expression for various social values: critics of globalization, environmentalism, fairness, healthism, etc. Normally, it is very difficult to arrange such diffuse values on the same platform. Yet, when we speak about ethics of consumption, we tend to affirm something comparable to Bauman's aesthetics of consumption. In accordance with the author, the aesthetics of consumption links the purport of consumption to the fever of new sensations. The aesthetics-based consumption does not assign values to well-respected duties but to high-level, ever-changing experiences. Ethical consumption goes beyond such aesthetics only through the fact that it occurs on the basis of diffuse yet stipulated values. Thus, ethical consumption is characterized by a kind of value set which becomes interpretable only within the framework of postmodern ethics.

References

Adams, Matthew, Raisborough, Jayne. 2008. What Can Sociology Say about Fair Trade? Class, Reflexivity and Ethical Consumption. *Sociology* 42: 1165–1182.
Alwitt, Linda F., Pitts, Robert E. 1996. Predicting Purchase Intentions for Environmentally Sensitive Product. *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 5: 49–64.
Bauman, Zygmunt. 1992. Survival as a Social Construct. *Theory, Culture, and Society* 9: 1–36.
Bauman, Zygmunt. 1993. *Postmodern Ethics*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
Bauman, Zygmunt. 2005. From the Work Ethic to the Aesthetic of Consumption. In: *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*. Maidenhead; New York: Open University Press, 23–42.
Bildtgard, Torbjörn. 2009. Mental Foodscapes: Where Swedes Would Go to Eat Well (and Places They Would Avoid). *Food, Culture and Society* 12: 498–523.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Carrier, James G. 2012. Introduction. In: Carrier, G., Luetchford, P. G. London (eds), *Ethical Consumption. Social Value and Economic Practice.* London: Berghahn Books, 1–36.

Clarke, David B., Doel Marcus A., Housiaux Kate M. L. 2003. General Introduction in the Consumption Reader. In: Clarke, D. B., Doel, M., A., Housiaux, K. M. L. (eds), *The Consumption Reader.* London: Routledge, 124.

Ding, Min, Ross Jr. et al. 2010. Price as an Indicator of Quality. Implications for Utility and Demand Functions. *Journal of Retailing* 86: 69–84.

Foucault, Michel. 1995. *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* New York: Vintage Books.

Fukuyama, Francis. 1999. *The Great Disruption – Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order.* New York: The Free Press.

Gabriel, Yiannis, Lang, Tim. 2003. *The Unmanageable Consumer. Contemporary Consumption and its Fragmentation.* London: Sage.

Goul Andersen, Jorgen, Tobiasen, Mette. 2004. Who Are These Political Consumers Anyway? Survey Evidence from Denmark. In: Micheletti, M., Follesdal, A., Stolle, D. (eds), *Politics, Products, and Markets.* New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 203–221.

Guido, Gianluigi et al. 2010. The Role of Ethics and Product Personality in the Intention to Purchase Organic Food Products: A Structural Equation Modeling Approach. *Int. Rev. Econ* 57: 79–102.

Gulyás, Emese. 2008. Interpretations of Ethical Consumption. *Review of Sociology* 14: 25–44.

Guthman, Julie. 2003. Fast Food/Organic Food. Reflexive Tastes and the Making of 'Yuppie Chow'. *Social and Cultural Geography* 4: 45–58.

Hans, Jonas. 1984. *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Harrison, Michelle S. et al. 2007. The Increasing Cost of the Basic Foods Required to Promote Health in Queensland. *Medical Journal of Australia* 186: 9–14.

Inglehart, Ronald. 1977. *The Silent Revolution. Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Publics.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Johnston, Josee et al. 2011. Good food, good people. Understanding the Cultural Repertoire of Ethical Eating. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 11: 293–318.

Jonas, Hans. 1979. Die verwandelten Natur das menschlchen Handelh. In: Hans Jonas: *Prinzip Verantwortung, Versuch einer Ethic für die Technologische Zivilisation.* Frankfurt: Inselt Verlag.

Koos, Sebastian. 2012. What Drives Political Consumption in Europe? A Multi-Level Analysis of Individual Characteristics, Opportunity Structures and Globalization. *Acta Sociologica* 55: 37–57.

Lang, Peter. 2009. *Behind Ethical Consumption. Purchasing Motives and Market Strategies for Organic Food Products, Non-GMOs, Bio-fuels.* Bern: International Academic Publishers, 2009.

Lipovetsky, Gilles. 1996. *Amurgul datoriei* (Le Crépuscule du devoir). Bucharest: Babel.

Lockie, Stewart et al. 2002. Eating 'Green'. Motivations behind Organic Food Consumption in Australia. *European Society for Rural Sociology* 41: 23–40.

Micheletti, Michele, Stolle, Dietlind. 2005. Swedish Political Consumers. Who They Are and Why They Use the Market as an Arena for Politics. In: Bostrom, M., Follesdal, A., Klintman, M., Micheletti, M., Sorensen, M. P. (eds), *Political Consumerism. Its Motivations, Power, and Conditions in the Nordic Countries and Elsewhere.* Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 145–164.

Padel, Susanne, Foster, Carolyn. 2005. Exploring the Gap between Attitudes and Behavior. Understanding Why Consumers Buy or Do Not Buy Organic Food. *British Food Journal* 107: 606–625.

Sassatelli, Roberta. 2006. Virtue, Responsibility and Consumer Choice. Framing Citical Consumerism. In: Brewer, J., Trentmann, F. (eds), *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives. Historical Trajectories, Transnational Exchanges.* Oxford: Berg, 219–250.

Sassatelli, Roberta, Davolio, Federica. 2010. Consumption, Pleasure and Politics. Slow Food and the Politico-Aesthetic Problematization of Food. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 10: 202–232.

Sennett, Richard. 1977. *The Fall of Public Man.* New York: Knopf.

Seyfang, Gill. 2006. Ecological Citizenship and Sustainable Consumption. Examining Local Organic Food Networks. *Journal of Rural Studies* 22: 283–305.

Slater, Don. 1997. *Consumer Culture and Modernity.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Smith, N. Craig. 1990. *Morality and the Market: Consumer Pressure for Corporate Accountability.* London: Routledge.

Southerton, Dale et al. 2004. Introduction. Consumption, Infrastructures and Environmental Sustainability. In: Southerton, D., Chappels, H., Van Vliet, B. (eds), *Sustainable Consumption. The Implications of Changing Infrastructures of Provision.* London: Edward Elgar, 1–13.

Starr, Martha A. 2009. The Social Economics of Ethical Consumption. Theoretical Considerations and Empirical Evidence. *Journal of Socio-Economics* 38: 916–925.

Stromsens, Kristin. 2005. Political Consumption in Norway. Who, Why – and Does It Have Any Effect? In: Bostrom, M., Follesdal, A., Klintman, M., Micheletti, M., Sorensen, M. P. (eds), *Political Consumerism. Its Motivations, Power, and Conditions in the Nordic Countries and Elsewhere.* Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 165–181.

Szasz, Andrew. 2007. *Shopping Our Way to Safety. How We Changed from Protecting the Environment to Protecting Ourselves.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Venkatesh, Alladi, Meamber, Laurie A. 2008. The Aesthetics of Consumption and the Consumer as an Aesthetic Subject. *Consumption Markets & Culture* 11: 45–70.

Weber, Max. 1992 [1905]. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* London: Routledge

Willis, Margaret M., Schor, Juliet B. 2012. Does Changing a Light Bulb Lead to Changing the World? Political Action and the Conscious Consumer. *Annals AAPSS* 644: 160–190.

Wilska, Terhi-Anna. 2002. Me – a Consumer? Consumption, Identities and Lifestyles in Today's Finland. *Acta Sociologica* 45: 195–210.