INTERPRETATIONS OF ETHICAL CONSUMPTION *

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Abstract: During the last few years around a dozen boycotts have been called in Hungary; there are several ecologically and socially aware food-communities directly linking consumers and producers; at the end of 2006 a Fair Trade shop opened in Budapest, and there are product campaigns which accentuate various patriotic themes. All of these initiatives signal the emergence of new attitudes and values, a new type of behavior, that of *ethical consumption.*

Ethical consumption, new kinds of consumer needs are influencing market culture through the creation of various market-niches (see corporate social responsibility); furthermore, the wide-scale spread of ethical consumption can even lead to the transformation of market functions. The modern market is going from a mainly economic space to an area of moral action, a tool of regulation and social participation. As a social movement ethical consumerism can effect political culture and play an important role in public policy aiming towards sustainable development. According to West-European literature as well as to concrete experience ethical consumerism is more and more playing this role,[1] the local appearance of the movement beckons the question: what sort of values and institutions characterize this new consumer culture, and which of these can we encounter in Hungary?

The first part of this study deals with the phenomena of ethical consumption: it gives an overview of the literature, explicating the main research themes, and introducing its distinctive, most often examined forms of action. In the second part of the study, out of the interpretational possibilities, I look at ethical consumption as political consumption, as a form of social governance, examining its relevance as a way of public participation. I try to find an answer to the question whether the spread of ethical consumption should be imagined at the demise of classical political institutions, or as complementary to them, and which ethical issues are most likely to mobilize the public. The study is primarily based on data describing Hungarian political participatory culture, as well as an attitude survey of a representative sample. At the end of the study I will briefly refer to the possible causes of differences in ethical consumption attitudes and behaviors.

Keywords: ethical consumption, political consumption, new social movements, boycott, buycott, political participation

1 For example the terminology and the principles of fair trade, which originates from social movements of the early twentieth century, are now part of the EU legislations. For summary see: "Communication from the Commission to the Council on »fair trade«" (COM(1999) 619).

INTERPRETATIONS OF ETHICAL CONSUMPTION

Value-based attitudes and models of ethical consumption entered the realm of Anglo-American social sciences from the beginning of the 1960s. It was during this decade that articles began appearing in English periodicals which described the concept which today is usually termed ethical consumption, generally referring to it as responsible consumption, or socially responsible consumption. From the seventies, many studies examine environmentally conscious, later sustainable consumption, which are also analogous concepts. Finally, it was around the turn of the millennium that the present trend for the examination of value-based consumer behavior appeared which explicitly uses the term ethical consumption, viewing it as one of the new social movements. Although researching value-based consumption goes back several decades, ethical consumption has no remarkable theories, only a variety of explanatory trends.

Below I summarize the main approaches as stemming from a general definition of ethical consumption, as well as those which while not dealing directly with ethical consumption, nevertheless provide a relevant framework for its interpretation.

Most studies dealing with ethical consumer-behavior 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. The varying approaches accentuate different aspects of consumer behavior and ethics. Surveying the literature on ethical consumption, six tendencies can be identified.

The normative analysis of consumer behavior examines the consumer from the point of view *of ethically questionable consumer behavior*. The main question is what is considered right or condemnable in a concrete consumption situation. Vitell and Hunt (1990) developed a later widely popular and internationally tested method for the examination of the *ethics of consumer behavior.* The consumers were asked to make ethical statements concerning various consumption situations: drinking beverages without paying in a supermarket, saying anything when the bill was miscalculated in favor of the costumer, other advantages gained by the consumer in a passive way as a result of the inadvertence of the sales-clerk; record-copying; using an expired coupon for merchandise, etc. This type of research became popular not so much among social scientists, but with corporate managers, and since it is not closely related to the subject of this study, I will not introduce it in detail.

The central ideas of what might be termed the *(self)critique of consumption or consumer society is overconsumption* and its counterpart, *sustainable consumption,* based on the general notion of sustainable development, namely, that development should meet the needs of the present without compromising those of the future generations. It is often claimed that after a certain point material consumption can only be maintained at the expense of the quality of life.[2] The relevant literature is immense since this is the approach that has become embedded in governmental and international policies and in the institutional system: for example UNEP (United Nations Environmental Program) has developed a "10-Year Framework of Programmes on

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2   See e.g. Singer (1996); Kasser (2003).

Sustainable Consumption and Production" (the so-called Marrakech process), and the issue is also central to the sustainable development strategy of the European Union.

Most theories, studies, and public policies assume that the present consumption rate of the Euro-Atlantic region is ecologically not sustainable, and will result in the exhaustion of natural resources, the depletion of the natural environment even on the short term. Over-excessive material consumption is not right; the citizens of the wealthiest countries have a moral obligation to transform their consumption habits for the sake of sustainability.

According to the academic studies dealing with sustainable consumption, the key to long term, lasting changes in consumption behavior is the strengthening of common values that deviate from consumerist attitudes, and the presentation of alternative lifestyles and life-models[3]. From among the Hungarian scholars who argue in favor of this, Tamás Kocsis for example, building on the data from his fieldwork in Transylvania and the Őrség region in Hungary formulates the concept of a "person rooted in wholeness", according to which the common root of people reaching integrity and wholeness is essentially communal, cultural, natural and religious; when loosing these roots a person's life becomes directed "by money, material things and consumer attitudes" (2002: 112). The author also introduces the "voluntary simplicity" movement as a possible alternative.

The philosopher Kate Soper (2007) who coined the concept of "alternative hedonism" argues that to move towards ecological and social sustainability we first need to reformulate our present concept of a "good life" shaped by notions, which idealize the Euro-American modes of consumption. The alternative hedonist recognizes his/her contribution to the hazards of modern society, but changes his/her consumption habits not just to curb their negative environmental and social consequences, but because consuming in a different way is a source of inner gratification. The example often cited by Soper is that people do not only switch from car to bicycling because of environmental reasons, but because they enjoy cycling.

The approaches which attempt to explain ethical consumption via expanding on the notion of "consumer preference" are also in line with a *rational, self-satisfying consumption model of economics.* Rational consumer behavior, which measures various choices according to preference, in this case is not only influenced by price and quality, often considered the only markers. During the consumer's preference ordering "ethical purchasers may, therefore, have political, religious, spiritual, environmental, social or other motives for choosing one product over another" – says for example the preface of a representative book on ethical consumerism compiled by the founding-editor of the English magazine *Ethical Consumer* (Harrison et al. 2005: 2). Behavior which is in line with these motivations increases individual utility just as if one was following their self-interest in the strict sense. Following pro-social motivations causes moral gratification on the one hand, and can be interpreted as the manifestation of enlightened self-interest on the other. But there are those (for example Miller, whose argumentation we will later return to), who argue that even in the case of

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3   For an argumentation on the necessity of developing new life-style models see also Brown and Cameron (2000); Barnett et al. (2005).

ethical consumption moral dimensions only serve to disguise selfish motivations (better taste, health, prestige-consumption, etc.).

Many anthropological or anthropologically oriented sociological studies emphasize that consumption is a system of signs, a language.[4] Following the logic of these works, we can say that ethical consumption is a *communicative process of values* and as such it is nothing else than the re-labeling of an ever-present phenomenon. Consumption was always a culturally and socially determined, value-based activity, in which the members of society express their values, beliefs, worldviews and shape the forms of their social interaction; consumer decisions are obviously value-based, but they also contribute to the a development of values (Douglas and Isherwood 1996).

It is worth mentioning Douglas' theory (1996, 1997), which sees consumption as a cultural activity, in which through their consumer decisions people decide what kind of world they wish to live in; they choose certain goods because they are accepted in the desirable, or "condemned" in the undesirable world. At the same time, detailing further the idea of "consumption as a form of identity-expression" she adds that consumers have a much clearer idea about what they are protesting against than what they would indeed identify with. She states that consumers do not want to define their identities via the products purchased; consumption is the definition of what the consumer *is not.*

The two most widespread interpretations of ethical consumption are that of responsible consumption and political consumption.

According to those speaking of *responsible consumption,* the consumers do not only consider the satisfaction of their own needs, but reflect on their own existence as consumers. Preference-ordering is no longer just about self-interest, but the consumers try to estimate and evaluate the expected effects of their decisions, the interests of the "planet", of society and the environment (Webster 1975; Mohr et al. 2001; Miller 2001; Székely 2003). For example, when consumers satisfy their mobility needs, they do not only weigh whether the bus, the car or the bicycle is the swiftest and most comfortable way of reaching their destinations, but also what strain various transport modes place on their environment; in certain cases they subordinate their own interests to those of the community.

The keywords of this approach are *pro-social behavior, altruism and helping.* Many scholars view assistance, helping behavior as the parallel of socially responsible consumption, since both stress the importance of serving other people's interest and curbing individual advantages (Anderson and Cunningham 1972; Klein et al. 2004).

There is much empirical research on responsible consumption. Using market segmentation methods Anderson and Cunningham (1972) showed that there is a very distinct vanguard as far as social responsibility and altruistic helping is concerned, whose responsible attitude manifests itself in concrete consumer decisions. Donating, active community life, an interest in politics, high voter turnout, and a non-conservative values characterize the responsible consumer; the typical members of this group are young, cosmopolitan people, holding good jobs, with a higher than average socio-economic status. Also worth highlighting is the research done by Cooper-Martin and Holbrook (1993), who asked consumers to list consumer

4   See for example Bourdieu (1984); McCracken (1990), Douglas and Isherwood (1996).

experiences that had involved strong ethical considerations or implications for morality, and based on this compiled the behavioral prototypes of ethical consumption. The issues most often mentioned were religion, animal rights, discrimination, giving food to a homeless, gender, labor issues, patriotism, aggression and integrity; from among the behavioral forms besides buying, information gathering, boycott and non-buying, usage, and the treatment of waste also appeared. Cruelty-free products, choosing dolphin-safe tuna cans, purchasing reusable bottles, recycling were conceptualized by the researchers as *active* forms of ethical consumption; boycotts and not-buying were identified as *passive* forms. The consumers polled felt that altruist activities were right. According to conclusions of the study ethically superior consumption experiences are active and selfless activities.

However, Miller (2001) draws attention to the fact that the altruist motivation referred by these studies can be misleading. Analyzing interviews with consumers he concludes that what at first might seem to be altruist motivations, in almost all cases can be traced back to self-interest in its narrowest sense, e.g. to health, slimness, or the desire for delicious tastes.

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. The market is also a place for political and moral action. Market decisions reflect on the interpretations of material goods placed within a complex social and normative context, which according to the often used "dollar vote" analogy means that through their purchasing decisions consumers participate in shaping society, just as they do through their political vote (Dickinson and Carsky 2005; Dickinson and Hollander 1991).

The appreciation of the power of the consumer vote varies: certain scholars speak of the expression of political views, the shaping and influencing of social processes[5], others are more blunt, describing ethical consumption as a regulatory process, as the curbing of the power of (global) corporations.[6] Beck for example, considers consumer votes as nothing less than a tool of power. Since companies are in fact obliged to cooperate with consumer power, he visions a social movement, which can become the counterpoint of the global capital, which constantly evades social responsibility.

Though Miller (1997) does not use the notion of political consumption, he acknowledges the political power and quality of certain forms of consumption. In his opinion consumption creates an opportunity to become aware of the individual's power and of moral responsibility, which is at present disappearing from traditional politics. Furthermore, he states that new consumer movements – for example community[7] or green (environmentally conscious) consumption – could challenge given divisions between conventional notions of right versus left in politics.

In comparison to the others, with political consumption the *instrumental* nature of consumption has a central role: the aim to see changes in unwanted corporate or

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5   Among others Dickinson and Hollander (1991); Miller (1997); Dickinson and Carsky (2005); Stolle and Hooghe (2004); Andersen and Tobiasen (2004).

6   This viewpoint is held by Smith (1990); Micheletti (2003, 2004); Micheletti et al. (2004); Beck (2005).

7   Miller mentions Japanese consumer cooperatives as an example of community consumption, which directly connects producers and consumers and take environmental and social aspects into consideration.

political practices plays an important role in the decisions of the consumer (the choice of products and producers). Based on empirical research done in Denmark, Andersen and Tobiasen (2004) claim that in fact this intention to influence and to contribute to changes as well as the belief that individual consumption choices can lead to collective results is what differentiates political consumption from consumption concentrating only on the satisfaction of one's own needs. This need for change usually manifests itself in boycotts called for by various pressure groups (Hirschman 1970; Smith 1990), though the mentioned Danish researchers include the various consumption-oriented solidarity groups as well, for example the Fair Trade movements.

The studies interpreting ethical consumption cluster around three poles according to whether they use *normative* or *descriptive* approaches, whether they see ethical consumption as an individual action, or as both individual and collective, or as purely a *collective action,* finally, whether the behavior of the consumer is *instrumental* or *expressive*.

In recent years there has been a renaissance in interpreting *ethical consumption as political consumption* – which is probably related to the pluralization of political participation, the emergence and spread of new forms of political participation, as well as that the negative effects of globalization (i.e. the free flow of capital) became more evident, and growing power of transnational organizations (WTO, European Union), which do not provide a "direct" say for the citizens. In the following I will examine ethical consumption as a form of public participation, presenting its characteristic forms of action and its relevance.

FORMS OF ACTION IN ETHICAL CONSUMPTION

Forms of action in ethical consumption can be grouped into six groups: (1) non-consumption, (2) value-based regular shopping, (3) boycott, (4) positive boycott (buycott), (5) usage, and (6) placement after usage, disposal. An important difference between non-consumption and boycotting is that boycotts usually reflect a relationship with a certain economic player, more simply put, the producer. It is usually motivated by dissatisfaction with the performance of a company or a state, whereas non-consumption reflects opinions on the global effects of consumption, its aim is to mitigate the environmental and social effects of consumption (see above: ethical consumption as a critique of consumer society). The main difference between value-based regular shopping and positive boycotts (buycotts) is that the first one is regular, the second occasional; an example of value-based regular shopping is when someone regularly buys environmentally-friendly alternative products, whereas with the boycott consumers choose one particular product to support one particular issue. By use we mean saving, recycling, preservation, renovation, selective waste collection for environmental reasons, etc. Most literature on consumer movements focuses on the analysis of boycotts and positive boycotts (buycotts). One would assume that boycotts are intertwined with the history of consumer rights movements, but in actuality most boycotts are initiated by religious, human rights, environmental, political, minority rights organizations or unions, which wish to mobilize market forces, "consumer

power" in order to achieve their political aims. Monroe Friedman, who has studied the history of boycotts in the United States, defines boycotts as the following: "an attempt by one or more parties to achieve certain objectives by urging individual consumers to refrain from making selected purchases in the marketplace" (1999: 4). He emphasizes three important factors within this definition: (1) focus on individual consumers as opposed to organizational entities, (2) the use of marketplace means to secure what may or may not be marketplace ends (e.g. in the protection of the environment or human rights), (3) urging consumers to withdraw "selectively" from participation in the marketplace (p. 5). Furthermore, he differentiates between political and economic aims, between media and marketplace-oriented, product, brand, or company-oriented instrumental and expressive, as well as short, mid, or long-term initiatives. Besides this, referring to the *Ethical Consumer* magazine, Clouder and Harrison (2005) differentiates between strategic boycotts, which wish to achieve concrete changes in the performance of a particular company, and re-directive boycotts, which are not directed towards changes in the functioning of a company, but aim at raising awareness about certain ethical issues, changing the attitudes of the consumer, and with this directing the attention and the purchasing power of the consumer towards the more ethical competitors.

Friedman (1996, 1999) was also the first to deliver detailed research on *positive boycotts* (buycotts), which urge people to buy the products of certain companies, thus demonstrating their recognition, and facilitating the corporate/political behavior they see commendable. The buycott is not a sales promotion tool, as e.g. cause-related marketing, but a nonprofit initiative.

Friedman differentiates between various boycott types as well, separating the direct and indirect calls. In the first case, there is a direct relationship between the product and the issue, for example, if the costumer buys a product produced by the disadvantaged, they are in fact supporting their employment; the common tool for indirect calls is the "white list", where they offer more than one product which suits the issue (for example, environmentally friendly products). A buycott can be about one single product, or it can refer to certain characteristics of the product. Categorization according to the beneficiary is based on looking at whether the entity making the call and those benefiting from it are one and the same (e.g. a union's call, where the purchase of the product leads to the saving of a factory) or whether these people are different (e.g. in a campaign for animal rights, the beneficiaries of the consumer "vote" are the animals.).

When speaking of boycotts and buycotts a difference is made between success and efficiency. Friedman considers those boycotts successful, which can convince a lot of consumers to join, raise the awareness of many people. The measure of efficiency however, is whether the campaign manages to achieve its goal: in this case, to achieve changes in the target's policy and/or practice.

ETHICAL CONSUMPTION AS PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Based on the ethical consumption as political consumption approach, hereinafter I present some arguments that ethical consumption can be interpreted as public participation. Though according to some authors people turn to organized consumer action (for example boycotts) when this is the only remaining or the most effective means of fighting for their interests (Micheletti 2003; Harrison et al. 2005), and the increase in the significance of movements for ethical consumption goes hand in hand with a decrease in the significance of traditional politics (Miller 1997). Still, judging by the researches, which describe the transformation of political culture, the spread of ethical consumption is expected rather as a form of participation complementing, and not replacing traditional politics.

If we interpret ethical consumption as a new form of participation we can assume that it came to be as a part of certain transformations within political culture, while at the same time it retroactively effects the *institutions and the issues* of politics, that is, it is in a recursive relationship with the political systems. The question is, which features, or which transformational processes of the political systems have contributed to the emergence and spread of the phenomena of ethical consumption?

According to many scholars, e.g. Inglehart, Norris, Beck and Habermas it is a general tendency that within most of the wealthy northern countries the trust towards the government is on the decline, leading to a crisis which questions their legitimacy. This is due in part to the widely discussed decline of their efficiency, the poor regulatory performance of government, and partly to changes in values.

Habermas (1973) and Beck (1992, 1997, 1998, 2005) see the reasons for declining government efficiency, leading to problems of legitimacy in the fact that governments are incapable of harmonizing political, social and economic interests. The state has to simultaneously create the conditions for a prosperous economy and soften the dysfunctional effects of capitalism; doing all this in a way that does not curtail the fundamental functions of the economy. Though the state and the government depend on the dynamics of the economy, they are able to participate less and less in actively shaping it; the maneuvering room of the state is economically limited. Beck and Habermas agree that the globalization of labor and capital restrict the influence of governments and nation states. The question is, what sort reactions and actions does the decline of legitimacy evoke on the part of the citizens?

According to political participation researches Western democracies are not at all apathetic; they are increasingly active in exploring new forms of political participation, while the election turnout remains relatively stable. Interest in politics is changing both as far as its players, its issues and target groups are concerned. However in many cases, political action is no longer directed towards traditional political institutions, states and governments, but to international corporations (see boycotts). One of the main trends of this transformation is that the so-called protest politics moves from the periphery of political action to its centre. Its popularity has risen and by the 1990s it has become a decisive form of political action. New social movements, internet activism, international networks all offer new possibilities for involvement (Inglehart 1997; Norris 2002). These international tendencies are apparent in Hungary as well (Angelusz and Tardos 2006; Tóka 2006).

That ethical consumption can be interpreted as a form of public participation has its historical antecedents. The school which describes ethical consumption as political consumption has examined many cases related to consumer movements, the aims of which have been reinforced by or have been placed on the political agenda via these movements. To mention only a few of the better known ones, in the first half of the 19th century American consumers stood up for universal freedom rights when they boycotted tea and sugar products from plantations using slave labor (Glickman 2004). Due to the long lasting boycott of Nestlé, which was accused of the unethical marketing of infant formula, in 1981 the UNICEF and the WHO draw up the "International Code of Marketing for Breast milk Substitutes", which was then adopted by other actors of the industry as well (Friedman 1999). In Germany, Chancellor Kohl personally supported Greenpeace in their boycott of Shell, protesting the marine sinking of a decommissioned oil-drilling tower. The success of cooperation between NGOs, consumers, and politics strengthened the cause of environmentalism within German politics, and gave weight to German environmental concerns in the Franco-German debate on deep-sea nuclear testing (Beck 1998). The success of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa was in large part due to the international boycott movement announced by Nelson Mandela in 1993 (Irving et al. 2005).

ETHICAL CONSUMERISM IN HUNGARY

We can find similar historical examples in Hungary as well. The first better known example is the Védegylet (Hungarian Association of Patriots), which championing the cause of an independent national economy prescribed buycotts for its members, "who agreed that based on a vote, the satisfaction of necessities will be done via products and goods originating from domestic production, industry and professions, as long as these are available." (The memorandum of the founding assembly is published in Gelléri 1892: 99–100). The Tulip (Tulipán) Movement founded in 1906 was based on a similar patriotic notion. Widely supported by a variety of women's associations, the movement even managed to gain formal political support. "Through a strict decree, the Minister of Education obliged all teaching staff to work on the implementation of the association's call" (Egyesült Erővel 1909: 14; Szabó 1990). But there were less significant cases as well: for example, in 1905 a shoemaker was boycotted for insulting the shoemaker's union (Borsányi and Székely 1966). In 1907 Budapest residents protested against high leases through boycotts, calling on all leasers to join (Gyáni 1993).

Concerning the present state of ethical consumption we possess surveys on consumer attitudes and data on the number of boycott calls. The number of boycott calls reflects the readiness and willingness of civil society and the NGOs, as well as their mobilization and organization skills. In the case of boycotts commitment to the issues is closely connected to the readiness to take action, but this of course does not mean that just by this a boycott is necessarily successful or efficient (see Friedman). For this to be achieved, organizational skills, civic courage, and above all, an intensive media presence are also needed.

In Hungary, after the turn of the millennium there was a boycott virtually every year. Between 2001 and 2007 there were 16 boycotts and 4 buycotts that we know of, most of which were independent initiatives, while three were the local implementations of international campaigns. From among the mapped boycotts only a few managed to get wide-scale publicity and coverage from the nationwide media. Out of the examples listed below several reached the political agenda, and gained the support of politicians, with a few cases where politicians effectively assisted in finding a solution to the problem (e.g. Danone and Pepsi cases in 2001, or the Matáv [Hungarian Telecommunications Company] boycott in 2002, or the boycott of Austrian products) where politicians themselves spoke out and supported the campaigns. Most of these boycotts or buycotts are related to some economic problem (high oil prices, the circumvention of suppliers, factory closings), but there were several environmental, animal rights or general social issues as well (returnable packaging, animal-cruelty, gender, etc.).

Besides the number of boycotts, we know from various well documented representative survey data that 15-17 percent of the population claim that during the past few years they have joined boycotts (Braun & Partners 2006, TVE 2005).

Table 1. Boycotts and Buycotts 2001–2007

Target	Initiator	Causes/Aims	Year
Pepsi	Waste Prevention Alliance (HuMuSz) + 19 NGOs	Pepsi pulled out returnable bottles from the market, advertising disposable packaging	2001
⊕ Returnable bottles	Return to returnables! Campaign: (HuMuSz) + 19 NGOs	Keeping returnable bottles on the market	2001
Danone	"Viktor, Jano" anonym	Against the closing of the Győri Biscuit Factory previously purchased by Danone	2001
Matáv (Hungarian Telecommunications Company)	Private individuals, who later founded the Netért (For the Net) Association	For recalling the "Mindenkinet (For all)" package, which did away with cheap internet access	2002
OTP Bank	Chain email	OTP Faktoring bought up the assets of the Budapest Chamber of Commerce and Industry; the data-use was solicitous.	2002
⊕ buying the weeklies Heti Válasz and Demokrata, and the daily Magyar Nemzet (conservative media publications)	Viktor Orbán, former Prime Minister, that time leader of the opposition	Getting people to buy and prescribe to certain papers in order to a have a more well balanced media	2002
Brau-Heineken	Brau shareholders (anonym)	Heineken wished to buy up the Soproni Beer Company, through dishonest means thus causing harm to the shareholders.	2003
Westel, Mobile phone service provider	Latinovits Zoltán Civic Circle, the readers of the weekly Demokrata	Westel is not willing to advertise in the Demokrata.	2003

Table 1. cont. Boycotts and Buycotts 2001–2007

Target	Initiator	Causes/Aims	Year
Procter & Gamble, Iams	People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) – local implementation of a international campaign, anonym activists	Experimenting with animals	2003
⊕ NGOs fighting against the creation of the Rosia Montana goldmine in Transylvania	Tibor Kocsis, director of the documentary film New Eldorado	10% of the movie-ticket revenue offered to support of a local NGO	2004
ESSO	Local implementation of an international campaign by Greenpeace	Countering ESSO's systematically campaign against the Kyoto Protocol: ESSO spend millions of dollars on adds questioning the validity of the Kyoto process and the climate-protection institutions involved with it	2004
MOL, Hungarian Petrol (Hungarian petrol company)	National Alliance of Transporters and the Federation of International Private Transporters	Against high gasoline prices	2005
Benetton	International Campaign	Against animal mutilation during wool production	2005
Törley (Champagne Company)	Waste Prevention Alliance (HuMuSz)	Against Törley terminating returnable champagne bottles	2005
Rauch soft drinks	Chain-mail, producers	Because they are not willing to buy Hungarian fruits or only at a depressed price	2006
Axe cosmetics (Unilever)	Chain-mail Nina Umniakov choreographer	Sexist ads	2006
⊕ Fradi (football team)	Gábor Borókai, editor of Heti Válasz (political weekly)	Everyone should buy season tickets to "save" the team financially	2006
Auchan retail group and multinational companies in general	Krisztina Morvai civic rights advocate	They do not respect human rights	2007
Insurance companies which plan to participate in the privatization of the health sector	Christian-democratic People's Party	Against privatization of health services	2007
Sponsors of the Gay-lesbian festival	Christian-democratic People's Party	One year boycott of sponsors who support the "offensive" festival.	2007

Besides the actual cases one of the interesting questions is: which are those causes and social issues that consumers are sensitive to, which can grow to be state-wide movements, given the proper organizational capacity behind them?

In a 2005 survey, commissioned by the Association of Conscious Consumers,[8] people were asked to answer closed-ended questions as to whether the given information would play an important role in their consumer choices. Where the positive information was deemed important people were asked whether they would be willing to sacrifice more for a product that met their positive requirements, or substitute a product where the product information was negative. It was then possible to draw up a list on how important these causes were, as well as the group of potential boycotters and buycotters.

Table 2. Potential Boycott Causes

Negative information on corporate performance that might influence consumer decisions The company…	Ratio of those consider the information important or very important (%)	Ratio of those within the previous group who would choose other products of another company even if that was more expensive (%)	Potential boycotters (%)
Pollutes the environment	88.80	52.0	46.18
Applies misleading advertisement techniques	90.00	49.1	44.19
Employs child labor	75.80	54.9	41.61
Outsources its production capacities from Hungary	72.80	52.7	38.37
Provides humiliating working conditions	79.70	46.1	36.74
Produces in sweatshops in third-world countries	71.40	49.2	35.13
Is involved in corruption	65.90	48.9	32.23
Applies animal testing for cosmetic purposes	57.80	49.2	28.44
Does not pay its subcontractors	60.70	44.3	26.89
Avoids taxes	63.60	39.8	25.31
Restricts the operation of trade unions	54.00	45.3	24.46
Is involved in arms production	52.30	46.2	24.16
Produces in countries under oppressive regimes	45.40	46.4	21.07
Has interests in the nuclear industry	45.90	43.8	20.10
Has tax reliefs from the government	53.60	30.1	16.13

8   In 2005 the Association of Conscious Consumers commissioned the Hungarian Gallup Institute to make a survey on ethical consumption and political participation attitudes. The data of the survey contained 1015 representative cases for the adult population according to gender, age group, and settlement type. The margin of error for the statistical sample was < 3.2 % of N = 1000 persons.

Table 3. Potential Buycott Causes

Positive information on corporate performance that might influence consumer decisions. The company…	Ratio of those consider the information important or very important (%)	Ratio of those within the previous group who would choose the products of these companies even if that was more expensive (%)	Potential buycotters (%)
Produces in Hungary	82.15	54.22	44.52
Has environmental program	83.76	48.72	40.78
Has charity activities, offers donations	71.37	51.79	36.98
Supports the employment of the disadvantages	78.27	46.37	36.31
Has Hungarian owners	70.45	50.03	35.22
Cares about employees above the average (e.g. family-friendly workplace)	75.18	43.69	32.85
Supports the development of the local community	69.89	43.23	30.22
Supports cultural activities	65.20	41.56	27.10
Does not apply animal testing	59.72	42.16	25.17
Regularly reports on its social and environmental performance	59.40	39.71	23.58
Involves civil society organization, local governments in its decision making processes	56.93	35.61	20.26
Was awarded by civil organizations	38.25	40.81	15.59

The majority (more than fifty percent) of those who considered the three markers describing ethically, socially, and environmentally progressive corporate behavior important or very important would buy the products of these companies even if they were more expensive. If a product was manufactured in Hungary, if the owners were Hungarian, or if the manufacturer donated to good causes, 35–40 % of all questioned could be mobilized for a buycott. Less would be willing to sacrifice more for the products of companies awarded by civil society organizations, or who involve civil society organizations in their decision-making, or regularly report on their environmental or social activities.

If it became public that a company was employing child labor, polluting the environment or outsourcing its production from Hungary, most of those who consider such information important would switch to another product (38–46%) – and would boycott the original one –, even if its replacement was more expensive. If it turned out that they had received tax reliefs from the government, or were tax evaders, or had interests in the nuclear industry, people would have little motivation to boycott, this information being the least likely to make them join such initiatives.

Willingness to join boycotts and the ratio of potential boycotters is similar to that of other European countries. Out of the 37 European countries participating in the 1999–2004 World Values Survey, the median of those who were willing to participate in boycotts is 34.6% (www.worldvaluessurvey.org)

It has to be noted that when listing the importance of certain causes most consumers were aware of their "purchasing power", their ability to enforce their interests as consumers. Nearly every second person, i.e. 47% of those asked agreed with the statement that "if consumers preferred the products of companies who demonstrate social responsibility and produce in environmentally friendly ways, the companies will endeavor to meet these demands".

Besides giving an overview of the presence of ethical consumption, the analysis of the mentioned Hungarian data provides a proper basis for the foundation of a concept of ethical consumption as a form of public participation. According to the theoretical principles found in international literature I examined the presented data with the aim of discovering the relationship between ethical consumption and political participation attitudes[9]. Based on the analysis seen as statistically significant, compared to the average, those who possessing the attitude of an ethical consumer:

– were more likely to join boycotts, and were more likely to think that boycotts were an efficient tool for enforcing their interests and expressing their opinions;
– were much more likely to consider participation in political elections (parliamentary elections, local elections, interim parliamentary and local elections, national or local referendums) important, 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 social forums and dialogues as an efficient tool for enforcing their interests and expressing their opinions.

Beyond this, it is likely that those ethical consumers who consider parliamentary elections important are more likely to join boycotts than the majority who also consider parliamentary elections important. Their conviction concerning the importance of parliamentary elections strengthens the positive relationship between the attitudes of ethical consumption and the intention to join boycotts, which suggest that ethical consumption as a form of participation is spreading not as a replacement of, but as a supplement to traditional political institutions.

Thus the results of the study show that ethical consumers have a very strong commitment to the use of traditional political tools, participation in various types of elections, though they are much more skeptical about the efficiency of these forms.

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9 It was not the aim of the study to determine the causal relations or direction of such relationship, or to reveal the basis of consumer and political attitudes, but merely to show the existing context. 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 study results and the methodology were published in a paper entitled *Etikus fogyasztás mint a közügyekben való részvétel* [Ethical consumption as a form of public participation], *Politikatudományi Szemle* [Review of Political Science], 2007/4, 111–129.

From the tools of civic or movement politics they are more attached to methods closer to the institutions of direct democracy, namely, boycotts and social forums.

ETHICAL CONSUMER ATTITUDES AND REALITY

It is, however, evident that there are not as many ethical consumers in Hungary as the results of the attitude surveys would lead us to believe. This is certainly true if we look at the market share of environmentally friendly Fair Trade products or the products of social entrepreneurs. The situation is similar in Western Europe. What is the reason for this discrepancy?

The first and most obvious answer is that attitude is only one of the driving forces behind consumer behavior. Besides this, consumer decisions are influenced by many other factors: perception, consumer identity, personality, influence of reference groups, objective circumstances, etc. Attitude surveys reflect only on one of these aspects, considering all other variables as constant.

Besides the general explanation it seems worthwhile to explore a few of the concrete ideas, the first two of which is based on the internal characteristics of the consumer.

Out of the scholars referred to in light of the discrepancy between attitudes of ethical consumption and actual consumer behavior Miller (2001) deals with this in greater detail, developing three possible explanations, out of which he considers one particularly important, namely the differentiation between the morality of consumption (what is right and wrong) and its ethics (its altruistic nature). There is a contradiction between the morality and the ethics of consumption, which originates from the fact that while morality is primarily determined by act of thrift and saving money, ethical consumption – because of the higher price of the products – in most cases means a greater financial burden on the households[10].

From our previous paper giving a statistical analysis of the state of sustainable consumption in Hungary two further elements need to be mentioned. One is the role of *knowledge*, of *information*. Many theories of ethical consumption mention the theme that consumers weigh the effects of individual choices, taking into account their own interest as well as of those who are at a distance temporally or spatially, etc. But, is the average consumer capable of gathering and processing the needed information (if it is at all available); are they capable of unraveling the complex modes of action? Surveys related to Hungarian data point to the fact that – at least in Hungary – consumers do not really grasp the relation between consumption and sustainability, with the exception of a few issues that are often present in the media (e.g. selective waste collection), or where action and its consequences are extremely tangible for the consumers (Gulyás et al. 2006, 2007). At this point it is again worth quoting Brown and Cameron's (2000)

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10 Miller examined environmentally conscious, socially sensitive local and patriotic consumption through the consumption of household goods. As with other scholars – mentioned here as well – we can see that the subject of ethical consumption can be a wide variety of things, from fair trade coffee through wood products originating from sustainable forestry all the way to garments that are child-labor free, or cosmetics that do not use animal testing. For the variety of cases see Boda and Gulyás (2006).

study, who, referring to their simulation experiments claim that in relation to the sustainability of consumer behavior the presentation of the problem of scarce public goods and the possible solutions for this instigated positive changes for more sustainable consumer choices.

The other possible explanation is the *lack of infrastructure, the limits of access.* Those who see ethical consumption as political consumption compare it to voter behavior. To have a working representative democracy and a proper political voting system extensive and well functioning infrastructure is needed, e.g. elections every four years, electoral districts, voting booths, vote counters, evaluation, etc. There is no similar infrastructure available for ethical consumption: gaining access to products which are environmentally or socially preferable is often cumbersome: the maneuvering-room of generally pro-social or environmental consumption is quite limited. However, in the case of sustainable consumption we find that where supportive infrastructure, enabling environment is provided for positive attitudes consumer behavior also tends to follow suit.

Clarifying and analyzing the complex reasons behind the discrepancy between the attitude and the behavior of the ethical consumer involves further research. Up to now the study of ethical consumption has focused on understanding and explaining key issues and behavioral forms, and we have hardly encountered studies examining this particular problem.

SUMMARY

Ethical consumption is on the agenda of social sciences since the end of the 1960s, but to this day no dominant theories have emerged, only various research trends. Within research there are six major trends describing ethical consumption (1) as ethically questionable consumer behavior, (2) as the (self)critique of consumption or consumer society, (3) as the extension of rational consumer behavior, (4) as a communications process of values, (5) as responsible consumption, helping others, (6) as political consumption, social governance.

The main forms of actions for ethical consumption are: non-consumption, value-based regular shopping, boycotts, buycotts, usage, and placement after usage, disposal.

At the turn of the millennium the most popular approach of ethical consumption is that of political consumption, and out of the behavioral forms research on boycotts and buycotts is blooming. Empirical studies point to the interrelatedness of political participation and ethical consumption attitudes showing that as a form of public participation, ethical consumption complements but does not replace traditional political forms.

The ethical consumption attitudes are present in Hungary as well. In choosing products, besides the price–value balance, the majority of the population would consider patriotism, environmental protection, fair employment, and consumer information to be important. In the past 15 years willingness to join boycotts is slowly increasing: since the turn of the millennium there were about 20 boycott and buycott

calls, and 15–17 percent of the population stated that they joined boycotts in the last years. By today the majority of Hungarian consumers are aware of their "purchasing power", of the possibilities for enforcing their consumer interests. In line with the European rates about 35–45% of the population belongs to the group of potential boycotters and buycotters, which – based on their attitudes – can become a new impulse for the new dimensions of market competition. Through the proliferation of ethical consumption the role of the market can be altered: what has previously been a primarily economic space may become a forum for social and political participation. However, the relatively high level of readiness has not yet met up with the civil sector, and their willingness and capacity to organize boycotts or other ethical consumption activities. Although after the turn of the millennium we are hearing of more and more initiatives, only a few of them resonated on a nationwide level. The pluralization of political participation possibilities, the expression of opinions and enforcement of interest would provide a good breeding ground for the spread and strengthening of ethical consumption.

International and local experience, as well as market data shows that there is a considerable discrepancy between the attitude and the actual behavior of the ethical consumer. Possible reasons for this are the complexity of consumer behavior, the lack of information, knowledge and infrastructure, and limited access to "ethical" products. To understand and explain the exact role of these factors further research is needed.

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