

How Democratic Must Ethical Consumerism Be?

Nikolas Mattheis

Abstract:

This paper reviews recent accounts of ethical consumerism. It supports a 'broadly democratic' view according to which consumerism should be sensitive to political equality but not necessarily to formal democratic processes. First, the paper outlines the motivation for democratic constraints on ethical consumerism and sketches Washeed Hussain's 'proto-legislative' account. Then, Hussain's view is shown to be objectionably conservative due to its bias towards formal democratic processes. Next, the paper discusses two recent alternative proposals – 'positive change consumerism' (Hassoun 2019) and a broadly democratic account (Barry and MacDonald 2019) – and argues that the latter is superior. Finally, the implications of endorsing the broadly democratic account are considered. It is being argued that consumption decisions should *generally* be sensitive to power imbalances.

Keywords:

ethical consumerism; proto-legislative view; positive change; democracy

How Democratic Must Ethical Consumerism Be?¹

In this paper, I review recent accounts of ethical consumerism. I support what I call a 'broadly democratic' view according to which consumerism should be sensitive to political equality but not necessarily to formal democratic processes. The paper is structured as follows. Section I outlines the motivation for democratic constraints on ethical consumerism and sketches Washeed Hussain's 'proto-legislative' account. Section II argues that Hussain's view is objectionably conservative by being biased towards formal democratic processes. Section III discusses two recent alternative proposals – 'positive change consumerism' (Hassoun 2019) and a broadly democratic account (Barry and MacDonald 2019) – and argues that the latter is superior. Section IV considers the implications of endorsing the broadly democratic account. Here, I argue that consumption decisions should *generally* be sensitive to power imbalances.

I: Democratic Constraints and the Proto-Legislative View

Many people engage in 'ethical consumerism', 'the practice of choosing to buy certain goods and services at least partly on the basis of ethical considerations' (Hussain 2012: 112). Paradigm cases include the purchase of fair trade and ecological products, and the boycott of Primark or products from Saudi Arabia. At first sight, these consumption decisions might seem legitimate. Given the manifold deficits of our globalized economy, it seems imperative to alter patterns of consumption and production. And given that we own the means with which we make these decisions – our money – it seems that everyone has 'the authority to act privately in defense of the common good' (*Ibid.*: 128). Call this view 'common good anarchism' (*Ibid.*). Common goods anarchism shouldn't be confused with an 'unrestricted authorization' (cf. *Ibid.*: 115) to use one's market power. 'Ethical' consumers might have objectionable visions of the 'common good'. When Nazis boycotted Jewish goods, they did so because they believed this would further the common good too (cf. *Ibid.*: 117-8). Similarly, when Christian consumers avoid products connected to gay culture (cf. *Ibid.*), these decisions also rest on ethical considerations like beliefs about moral duties.

But even when the values underlying a consumption decision appear reasonable, promoting them through the market can violate procedural norms of democracy. When Western consumers decide to purchase fair trade imports, they determine the living conditions of people in developing countries – potentially against their will or more urgent needs. Likewise, when wealthy Jewish consumers boycotted Mexico to pressure it into reversing a resolution condemning Zionism, Palestinians couldn't exert equal influence (cf. *Ibid.*: 119-20). Differences in wealth come with differences in purchasing power. But exploiting these would run counter to the

¹ I want to thank Agneska Bloch, Liam Kofi Bright, Julian Fink, Leon Schlüter, and the participants of the LSE-Bayreuth Student Philosophy Conference 2019 for helpful comments and criticisms.

spirit of democracy. For 'if we are committed to non-subjection, we must avoid relying on power that is clearly distributed unequally' (cf. Viehoff 2014: 368).

Taken together, these worries – about objectionable visions of the common good and about procedural norms – call into question whether we are allowed to promote the common good through the market as we think fit. One potential response is this: A "don't buy Jewish"-boycott isn't by itself problematic – after all, no consumer is *obligated* to buy from a Jewish store. What seems troubling, really, is that Jews' fundamental rights and liberties (freedom of conscience and minimum subsistence, say) would be vulnerable to such changes in demand. On this response, consumers only have limited obligations:

'[Y]our obligation as a consumer kicks in only if the state fails to satisfy its obligation to create the economic circumstances necessary to uphold your fundamental rights and liberties.' (Fink and Schubert 2018: 14).

What is needed, then, is public action that minimizes the risk of exploitation and blackmail – 'precisely as the modern welfare state does' (*Ibid.*), e.g. through insurance schemes.²

While institutional reforms are surely important, focussing on them exclusively seems insufficient for two reasons. Firstly, even with structural improvements, non-state agents still have responsibilities in consumption. For one, the welfare support granted by modern states is insufficient to prevent objectionable uses of consumption power. Vast economic inequalities persist in societies where everyone is above a subsistence standard. These translate into power inequalities through diverging possibilities to shape market outcomes – and enable exploitation since individuals care about more than mere sufficiency. Imagine that all Mexicans and Palestinians had a guaranteed 'economic foundation for exercising fundamental rights and liberties' (*Ibid.*). Other groups would still be able to pressure them into concessions because of bargaining power disparities. Moreover, it is unrealistic even that more extensive institutional support would be sufficient to prevent this. Assuming that we are 'voting with money', only a policy of constant interference – i.e. one that restored power imbalances as soon as they occurred and held things at 'one person, one vote', as it were – could do so. If democratic constraints on consumption are only a 'subsidiary norm' that kicks in when state action fails (cf. *Ibid.*: 12-14) – and if we don't think that state action ought to undermine the market altogether – we cannot capture the thought that 'considerations of unequal power' ought not to play a role in shaping societal outcomes (cf. Viehoff 2014: 361).

Secondly, merely stressing the necessity of structural improvements provides little guidance on how ethical consumerism should proceed when desirable institutions are lacking. *Given* that there are large inequities in market power, under which conditions can we legitimately bring about social change through consumption decisions?

² Thomas Christiano (2016, 2018) similarly stresses the importance of institutional adjustments.

According to one influential account, this is the case when consumption decisions are 'consistent with the central procedural aims of a liberal democracy' (Hussain 2012: 124). Washeed Hussain argues that consumerism should respect values such as 'security for the basic liberties, political equality, democratic deliberation, justified coercion, and managed politicization' (*Ibid.*: 117). This rules out cases like racist boycotts which undermine basic liberties. Moreover, when the formal democratic process has 'already addressed the issue in question' (*Ibid.*: 126),³ it shouldn't be undermined by consumption decisions, such as boycotts. For instance, rich opponents of nuclear power shouldn't overthrow the national nuclear plan. Absent formal legislation, consumption decisions should provide the basis for further regulation. Consumers should act in a 'proto-legislative' way: Rather than unilaterally determining outcomes, they should employ democratic deliberation and should aim to put the issue at stake 'on the formal legislative agenda' (*Ibid.*: 126).⁴

II: Conservative Bias

By stressing procedural values, the proto-legislative account rules out cases of ethical consumption where common good anarchism seems overly permissive. Recently, however, two papers objected that the proto-legislative account does so at the cost of being too restrictive (Hassoun 2019; Barry and MacDonald 2019).⁵ In this section, I reconstruct the central worry.

According to the proto-legislative view, consumers have to abide by strict procedural norms when supplementing the formal democratic process with market activism. However, this position seems to presuppose the following: Market activism that doesn't abide by these procedural values *reduces* the realisation of democratic values. While this might frequently be the case, assuming this blanketly seems unwarranted for three reasons.

Firstly, formal democratic processes are highly procedurally imperfect, too (cf. Barry and MacDonald 2019: 14-19). While Hussain acknowledges that there are imperfections in legislations such as the United States, he holds that 'these injustices do not rise (for the most part) to a level where undemocratic measures would be permitted to change them' (Hussain 2012: 135). Yet, it is unclear why we should think this. Nationally, legislation is heavily influenced by large-scale corporations (think of firearms and fossil fuel lobby). Internationally, Western countries have set up extractive institutions that cause poverty for millions of people (cf. Pogge 2012) or at least take advantage of people in the Global South (cf. Miller 2010: 59), e.g. by establishing an inequitable global trade regime. If formal acts result from severe political inequalities, it is unclear why they should be privileged over informal market activism. Nothing about the 'formality' per se

³ For a discussion of this condition, see (Barry and MacDonald 2019: 8-9).

⁴ Hussain limits these constraints in two ways. Firstly, they don't apply in situations of severe injustice (cf. Hussain 2012: 134). Secondly, they only apply to consumers actively seeking to bring about societal change. I will return to the latter point in Section IV.

⁵ Though note that different rationales underlie their objections (Barry and MacDonald stress procedural equality whereas Hassoun emphasizes freedom and positive change).

gives an act legitimacy.⁶ In fact, to advance procedural equality, it can sometimes be necessary to *resist* formal arrangements (cf. Delmas 2018). When formal institutions perpetuate injustice, considerations of fairness and beneficence don't obligate us to support but rather to undermine them.

Of course, one could reiterate that what is thus needed are structural adjustments for more equitable conditions within the formal process. Consumerist vigilantism would supposedly only inhibit these. But this is where a second downside of the proto-legislative view's bias towards formal processes becomes visible: It neglects that ethical consumerism can be a crucial means for furthering procedural equality (cf. Barry and MacDonald: e.g. 19; Hassoun 2019: 39). Consumers influence the distribution of political power for people around the world.⁷ Their money can strengthen large-scale corporations or marginalized workers, depending on what they purchase. Thus, political influence in the formal system isn't independent of consumption decisions; and exercising influence through these can be a crucial enabler of more procedural equality. Hence, procedural equality can be advanced *even* when the consumption decision isn't entirely procedurally democratic and *especially* then (e.g. when it is necessary to resist an existing law or when the inclusion of large-scale corporations in a deliberation process would prevent change).

Finally, the proto-legislative account overlooks that the formal democratic process isn't and shouldn't be the ultimate aim of all political activism (cf. Hassoun 2019: 45, cf. Barry and MacDonald 2019: 14). In some areas, informal action is generally preferable. Consumers might support gender-neutral children toys without demanding a ban of other toys (cf. Barry and MacDonald: 14). Consumers can use their 'data' purchasing power, to boycott agencies such as Google, without calling for regulation. Moreover, the relevance of informal activism isn't a contingent fact about some states. True democratic participation requires more than the mere aggregation of individual preferences; it needs elaborate institutional mechanisms. But whatever the institutional setup, democratic deficits can persist, for instance because some topics don't receive majority uptake and create 'political inertia' (Markovits 2005). Here, informal activism can be a 'dynamizing counterweight to the rigidifying tendencies of state institutions' (Celikates 2016: 988). Political engagement shouldn't end where the formal process does.

In sum, the proto-legislative account seems to be unjustifiably conservative: by prohibiting consumerism which isn't proto-legislative, it upholds conditions and processes which themselves aren't democratic.

One might reject the charge of conservatism. After all, the proto-legislative view constrains all consumerist engagement, even when it aims at *upholding* structures. And indeed, some of the cases Hussain rules out as illegitimate forms

⁶ Even when an institution exercises 'legitimate authority', it is unclear whether its subjects have a 'prima facie obligation' to obey its commands (cf. Smith 1973). More generally, the debate on (civil) disobedience can be an insightful source for the debate on ethical consumerism. The literature on disobedience supports the point that actions that conflict with existing laws can sometimes be permissible and even obligatory.

⁷ I discuss doubts about this point in Section IV.

of 'social change ethical consumerism' seem less concerned with 'social change' than with the prevention of change (e.g. Christians boycotting activities which 'normalize gay and lesbian lifestyles'; Hussain 2012: 123). However, this doesn't save the proto-legislative view from the charge of conservatism. The account is benchmarked to the *status quo of bargaining power* within the democratic process. When ethical consumerism must abstain from issues 'already addressed' by the formal democratic process, this perpetuates structural injustices. The proto-legislative view is conservative regarding change through other channels.

Proponents of the proto-legislative account might raise a second objection. When abandoning the bias towards the formal democratic process, doesn't this mean that we cannot condemn cases like boycotts of Jewish products? Without procedural norms, one might worry, all use of market power will seem permissible. Yet, this objection is misled. It is important to distinguish the two objections against the common good anarchism highlighted in Section I. Even common good anarchists can require that the vision of the common good that is being advanced through consumerism is a 'reasonable' one (cf. Barry and MacDonald 2019: 6-7). Violations of this *substantive* condition are what is troubling about cases like "don't buy Jewish". Accordingly, even those rejecting procedural constraints on consumerism can condemn these cases. Furthermore, rejecting the proto-legislative view doesn't mean that one has to abandon all procedural constraints on ethical consumerism as we will see in the next section.

III: Two Middle Ways

There are two recent proposals of middle ways between overly restrictive democratic constraints and overly permissive market anarchism. Call these accounts 'positive change consumerism' and 'broadly democratic consumerism', respectively. While they overlap, I argue that the broadly democratic account is preferable.

According to positive change consumerism:

'Absent just institutions, significant moral constraints on consumption exist. Still people can, and may have to, pursue non-democratic, but genuinely positive change.' (Hassoun 2019: 45).

The constraints that apply, according to Nicole Hassoun, include respect for basic rights, liberties, and political equality, and avoidance of great environmental destruction (cf. *Ibid.*). But, unlike on the proto-legislative view, market activism doesn't have to further deliberation and doesn't have to strive for formal legislation (cf. *Ibid.*: 42-3). Against the proto-legislative view, 'people may generally consume in ways that *actually* promote the common good' (*Ibid.*: 39). But against common good anarchists, it is not sufficient that consumers 'just do whatever they *think* promotes positive change' (*Ibid.*) – the change has to be 'truly positive' (*Ibid.*: 44).

However, the notion of 'truly positive change' is problematic. While Hassoun acknowledges that 'people reasonably disagree [e.g.] about what constitutes fair

labour standards' (*Ibid.*: 42), it is unclear just how seriously she takes this disagreement. At points she seems to be advancing a substantive conception of the common good, e.g. when claiming that often 'we know when consumption fulfils the condition of promoting positive change' (*Ibid.*: 43). Elsewhere, she even seems to endorse certain actions, like boycotts of nuclear power when 'people' and the environment 'benefit' from them (*Ibid.*: 39).

Thereby, the positive change account runs into a dilemma: Either it is widely inapplicable, or it underplays the significance of disagreement about the common good. Take the first horn first. Hassoun allows consumption which truly is 'without any bad consequences' (*Ibid.*: 40). But what would it mean that there are no bad consequences involved, e.g. in trying to 'reduce poverty' (*Ibid.*: 42) through consumption? Perhaps that no one would be made worse-off through the transaction. Yet, such a scenario seems extremely unlikely. Ethical consumption decisions usually create trade-offs, harming either workers (people being laid off in the short run) or at least companies (who might lose out on profits). Maybe, however, my interpretation of 'no bad consequences' is too narrow. Some losses might not register as 'bad consequences'. Rather, consumption might be taken to be legitimate when consumers act within 'whatever moral constraints exist' (Hassoun 2019: 29).

But this leads to the second horn of the dilemma. Pointing to existing 'moral constraints' and 'positive change' is evasive. Assuming that ethical consumerism leads to positive change – even when it goes beyond narrow no-loss instances (as implicit in the examples Hassoun cites) – suggests that we can say when consumption decisions lead to truly positive change. But since this is contested, permitting such cases seems to only vindicate that powerful consumers impose *their* notion of positive change. The positive change account would then collapse back into common goods anarchism.⁸ It would, again, understate the importance of deliberative engagement for democratic procedures. Consider a Filipina worker affected by consumption decisions which aim at reducing poverty in the long-run. This worker can reasonably worry about losing her exploitative job through consumer boycotts. To account for her worries, consumers might try to advance a gradual agenda, including clear incentive-signalling to companies to rethink labour conditions in the long-run – while still maintaining short-run jobs. This might involve 'lend[ing]' consumer power to Filipinos (Hussain 2012: 142). But in any case, it doesn't seem an appropriate response to disregard the *actual* views of marginalized people and to skip the deliberative process by (implicitly) suggesting to know what constitutes positive change.

Therefore, the positive change account seems unconvincing: it either is inapplicable in real-world decisions which are characterized by trade-offs, or it undemocratically presupposes a notion of positive change. Let us thus turn to the second proposed middle way between common goods anarchism and the proto-

⁸ This worry is anticipated in a footnote in (Barry and MacDonald 2019: 6).

legislative view – the broadly democratic account proposed by Christian Barry and Kate MacDonald. On this account:

- '(1) Ethical consumers should respect basic liberties and advance a reasonable conception of the common good.
- (2) Ethical consumers should question the reliability of their own views and seek additional information (including about the views of others) as a basis for informing and revising their beliefs about appropriate objectives of social change.
- (3) When engaging with the views of others, ethical consumers should remain sensitive to power disparities that may exist between them and those whose lives they seek to influence.' (Barry and MacDonald 2019: 24)

These constraints seem superior to those of the positive change account in two regards.⁹ Firstly, unlike the positive change account, they don't assume a notion of 'truly positive change' – and thereby don't (implicitly) presuppose the superiority of some conception of the common good. While broadly democratic constraints include an obligation to seek reliable information about the conditions and implications of consumption choices, note that this is different from the demand that actions must be truly positive. Rather, what is demanded is that consumers incorporate the perspectives of relevant stakeholders in the process. Secondly, these procedural requirements account more adequately for unequal consumption powers. The emphasis on sensitivity to power differentials – entirely absent on the positive change account – does justice to the political dimension of consumption.

IV: Democratic Constraints Understood Broadly

So far, I have suggested that a broadly democratic account most adequately captures constraints on ethical consumerism. In this section I want to substantiate and defend this account by exploring *when* it should apply. I will argue that the broadly democratic account should guide our consumption decisions *generally*.¹⁰ I now address versions of the objection that this is too demanding.

A first worry might be that accepting the principles of the democratic account everywhere imposes excessive information costs. I can't always find out what other people around the world think about what matters most, e.g. environmental protection or fair wages. Yet, the broadly democratic account doesn't demand that we are *fully* informed about other people's values and how they relate to our options. It demands that we make reasonable efforts at gathering the relevant

⁹ Note that both accounts make claims like the following: '[A]ctions of ethical consumers should not violate rights or undermine freedoms' (Barry and MacDonald 2019: 24). This implies an emphasis on negative duties. However, as Judith Lichtenberg (2010) has argued, the distinction between positive and negative duties seems exaggerated in the face of the 'new harms' globalization brings. In the following, I thus prefer not to stress a strict no-harm condition and instead focus on the 'respect' formulation which calls for behavioural change broadly – by refraining from actions or taking up new ones.

¹⁰ I think Barry and MacDonald might think this too. They reject Hussain's separation of private and public spheres. However, at some point they seem to make room for permitting price-quality consumerism on grounds of a 'commitment to individual freedoms' (Barry and MacDonald 2019: 24).

information and don't take decisions *baselessly*. In many circumstances, coordinating agencies like NGOs can mediate the information gathering process (cf. Hussain 2012: 139-140; cf. Barry and MacDonald 2019: 27).¹¹

This points to an important observation. Since the broadly democratic account is a response to power inequalities, it will impose more demanding obligations on those big market power, like states or rich individuals like Bill Gates and coordinating agencies like NGOs, than on those with 'weakness of market power' (Barry and MacDonald 2019: 28), like poor families in the Global South or a poor single-parent in their grocery decisions. This is not to understate the responsibilities of ordinary consumers, however. In principle, the broadly democratic account applies to all consumption decisions. Its obligations only apply *more weakly* when people have less power (and are suspended when people have no alternatives).

One might wonder, however, why responsibilities of ethical consumerism should apply to ordinary consumers at all. After all, our consumption decisions seem to only have minor effects in the determination of social outcomes. Assuming, as I did throughout, that individual consumers have market 'power' might seem misleading.¹² Demanding for democratic consumerism, one might worry further, distracts from our truly political obligations. 'Consumerism', an activity which seemingly operates within capitalist logics, can never challenge systemic deficits, one might think. Stressing individual consumers' responsibilities in this way might even seem to silence truly political form of activism that could do so (e.g. protesting and civil disobedience).¹³

Yet, we shouldn't downplay the political dimension of our consumption decisions. The fact that our consumption decisions only have limited causal efficacy doesn't mean that we have no responsibilities in consumption. One can have moral responsibility without immediate causal responsibility (cf. Sartorio 2004). Moreover, it is not true that ordinary consumers have no impact. My decision to buy from my local farmer directly alters market outcomes. Consumption decisions also change companies' incentives by affecting demand. This is especially the case when consumption decisions are coordinated. An individual protestor also doesn't exercise significant influence. But coordination can kickstart a consequential movement. The same holds for coordinated consumer boycotts. In fact, it seems to be the case that individuals are especially willing to take on political responsibility when it comes to consumption (cf. Stolle and Micheletti: chp. 2). It is also important to understand the tools of democratic consumerism broadly as including activities which can challenge the foundation of our economy and

¹¹ See, among many others, a platform aggregating information about companies at <https://www.ethical.org.au/3.4.2/>, and a list of boycott calls at <https://www.ethicalconsumer.org/ethicalcampaigns/boycotts>.

¹² I thank Liam Kofi Bright for raising this point in analogy to the 'paradox of voting'.

¹³ One might worry, more fundamentally, that the very notion of 'consumerism' is inextricably tied to capitalism. While none of what I say hinges on this, I think this worry is important and am open to a different notion (e.g. market activism).

political system (think of voluntary abstentions; I will return to this point shortly.) By foreclosing themselves to market activism, system critics would overlook that it can be a core vehicle of 'political participation', understood broadly as covering 'all acts that challenge or support any powerholders in society that engage in the allocation of common resources and values' (*Ibid.*: 264).

Yet, there is another worry about the demandingness of a general application of the broadly democratic account. Why should consumers have broadly democratic obligations in *all* of their consumption decisions? The proto-legislative account, for instance, only places democratic constraints on consumers *when they seek to bring about social change* (cf. Hussain 2012: 137) – and exempts ordinary price-quality consumption decisions.¹⁴ Relatedly, one might believe that many consumption decisions are entirely private. It seems implausible that I need to consider others' vision of the common good when buying a shampoo or a Valentine's gift. Requiring democratic constraints to apply in these kinds of decisions seems overly demanding.

This would, however, again understate the political dimensions of our consumption decisions. For one, even seemingly mundane decisions have public dimensions: Participating in Valentine's Day, say, might support heteronormativity. Assuming a strict distinction between the private and public sphere is unconvincing.¹⁵ Surely, some consumption choices are less immediately political than others (e.g. buying shampoo vs. buying firearms). But that doesn't mean that other consumption choices aren't also subject to democratic concerns (it just means that these concerns get triggered here less often). No use of power should undermine democratic values. Consumers should *generally* conform to democratic considerations in their consumption decisions.

One might object that in a market economy, property rights mean that we don't need to be able to justify every consumption decision as long as the underlying pattern is justified (cf. Hassoun 2019: 43). But clearly, the distribution of resources in our world isn't justified. It stems from large-scale historical and contemporary injustices (cf. e.g. Pogge 2012). When your money is (partly) the blood money of colonialism, you don't fully own it in a morally relevant sense. Furthermore, even when a distribution is just, owning something (e.g. a knife) doesn't mean that one can use it however one wants to (e.g. place it in your chest). Especially in democracies, property rights come with constraints seeking to ensure that the use of property doesn't undermine political equality (think of limits on campaign funding). Finally, the fact that democracies legally regulate

¹⁴ Hussain justifies this on grounds of the market's welfare-improving potential (while acknowledging the 'procedural deficits' of price-quality consumerism; cf. Hussain 2012: 135-138). For criticisms of this separation of spheres and arguments for why its underlying economic rationale is flawed, see (Fink and Schubert 2018: 8-12; Barry and MacDonald 2019: 19-24). Christiano (2018: 58-65), similarly, refutes Joseph Heath's defence of unaided markets.

¹⁵ This thought is salient in feminist philosophy, going back at least to the writings of Carole Pateman and Iris Marion Young.

markets doesn't entail that duties to comply with the democratic will end where laws do (cf. Christiano 2010: 215-216).

This doesn't mean that we should become "democratic consumption machines" and conduct stakeholder interviews before buying shampoo. What it means is this: Generally, our use of purchasing power, has to be justifiable to other persons. Our consumption decisions should be backed by a sensitivity to diverging conceptions of the good and power imbalances. Overall, we should not dominate others through our consumption decisions.¹⁶ Thus understood, democratic constraints cannot be used to judge whether an isolated choice (e.g. buying a shampoo) is a permissible use of our purchasing power. Rather, the duty to consume democratically is imperfect, i.e. can be discharged through various actions.

It is thus important not to misunderstand the principles of the broadly democratic account as side-constraints which enter once we have already decided to consume ethically.¹⁷ In line with the second condition which Barry and MacDonald propose, consumers should seek others' considered opinions across the whole process of consumption decisions, including when setting their consumption agenda. Ethical consumerism doesn't only mean that if we decide to buy a car, it should be as environmentally-friendly as possible; or if we decide to buy a new laptop, we should buy a laptop that doesn't support an oppressive company. It also means that we have to consider whether to buy a car or a laptop in the first place. Accordingly, one shouldn't think of the toolbox of ethical consumerism as limited to boycotts or boycotts. It can also involve lifestyle changes (like voluntary abstention) or discursive means (like in Nike Email exchange) (cf. Stolle and Micheletti 2013, e.g. chp. 8).

Thinking of democratic considerations only or mainly as constraints for ethical consumerism would be misleading. It can tempt one to think that our main obligation is to act in a proto-legislative way or with utmost sensitivity to power imbalances *in the narrow sphere* in which we are pushing for social change.¹⁸ For truly democratic activism, however, it seems more urgent that one's *overall* consumption basket furthers procedural equality, i.e. to have a consumption basket that is generally sensitive to power imbalances in a way that contributes to the creation of substantial preconditions for equal engagement. It is better to have some consumption decisions which aren't fully sensitive to power imbalances as long as one generally advances procedural equality than to be fully deliberative

¹⁶ This point has implications beyond consumerism since it concerns the *use of our money* more generally. Thus, I believe that similar democratic constraints should apply to market activism in form of investment decisions and (pace Reich 2018) to philanthropy (cf. also Barry and MacDonald 2019: 22-23).

¹⁷ As can happen when one separates the discussion of democratic constraints on consumerism from the, deeply connected, democratic rationale for ethical consumerism. Note that the case for the 'democratic potentials' of consumerism has been discussed for a long time (e.g. Tobiasen 2004) and consumerism understood politically continues to receive systematic attention (e.g. Boström, Micheletti, and Oosterveer 2019). Barry and MacDonald recognize the importance of consumerism's 'longer term influence over the enabling, structural conditions for balanced decision-making to be possible' (cf. Barry and MacDonald 2019: 29).

¹⁸ This takes up a point from Section II, namely that ethical consumerism can centrally further procedural equality.

in the few consumption decisions that one undertakes 'ethically' (i.e. in a value-driven way), while otherwise consuming without political reflection.

One might object that this wide interpretation of the broadly democratic account collapses back into positive change consumerism. Democratic consumers, as I understand them, view democracy and the realisation of conditions of equal participation as the guideline of their general consumption behaviour. But this may sound essentially like the positive change account, on which consumption didn't have to pay too much attention to procedural concerns if it contributed to truly positive change. All the broadly democratic account would seem to do then is to insert the notion of 'equal participation' for truly positive change.

I have two responses to this. Firstly, it is true that I am advocating for a democratic society, broadly understood as a society of equals (cf. e.g. Viehoff 2014; cf. Anderson 1999). This *is* a stance on what is valuable for society. It differs, however, from other, more substantive visions of what constitutes 'positive change'. Unlike concrete visions for the common good (e.g. Christian or green ideals), democratic use of power is the *condition* for an equitable formation and realizations of substantive visions of the common good. Within this framework, there is room for deliberation; and only within it, can true deliberation occur. That is why this value is more fundamental than a view of 'truly positive change'. Secondly, I do take procedural values on the way to realising this vision more seriously than the positive change account does. Furthering procedural equality in shaping society – by aiming for an equalisation of bargaining power overall – involves deliberation. While on my understanding democratic consumers shouldn't seek to maximize the realization of procedural values in each consumption decisions, they ought to recognize diverse opinions and power differentials across the consumption process.

Yet, at this point one might not worry any longer that the broadly democratic account is too demanding, but rather that it is too vacuous. Demanding that our 'overall consumption basket' should be in accordance with democratic values' might seem to offer no guidance for consumers at all. I have two responses to this worry. Firstly, the principles of the broadly democratic account do leave us with some concrete demands, even when it is understood to apply very broadly. Centrally, it demands that we take the voices of others seriously. For NGOs, this means to conduct stakeholder interviews. This means that we consider and respect the interests of others – especially less powerful agents – across our consumption process. Concretely, this means seeking out information on boycott calls (e.g. by marginalized groups). It means refraining from investment decisions about which we are in doubt. It means considering empowering consumption decisions across areas of consumption, whether in buying coffee or a house. It also demands the possibility of subordinating one's own convictions to the perspectives of others (e.g. when marginalized people think that living wages are a higher priority than fighting child labour; cf. Barry and MacDonald 2019: 26). The second response is that some uncertainty about concrete behavior isn't a buck of an account of market activism, but what we should expect from it. In voting

with money – just as in voting elsewhere – the choice ultimately remains an individual responsibility. The principles of the broadly democratic account appear to be the best guidance we can hope for.

V: Conclusion

Consumers should respect democratic constraints on their decisions. These constraints, however, needn't be linked to formal democratic processes. The proto-legislative view is unjustifiably conservative by being biased towards formal democratic processes. Consumerism can provide an important counterweight to this process. For this to be effective, requiring it to drive 'truly positive' change is unhelpful. Rather, consumers should seek to engage diverse perspectives and be sensitive to power imbalances, and they should do in consumption choices generally. Rather than being supererogatory, these are necessary constraints for activism in a democratic society – whether through the market or otherwise.

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