Introduction: ‘You're Not Just Buying Coffee’

In the winter of 2006, I stood in a Starbucks coffeehouse in Santa Barbara, California, and held in my hand a package of Guatemala Antigua coffee. At that time, I was a graduate student enrolled in a seminar titled ‘Sociology of Knowledge’, for which I had just read Edward Said's classic text, *Orientalism* (Said, 1978). Looking at the package, and taking in the images and text that adorned it, I realized that I held a contemporary travel narrative, quite similar to those Said had deconstructed in his book. With an artistic rendering of a Guatemalan woman in traditional dress, a map of coffee growing regions around the world, and a description of the *terroir* in which the coffee had been cultivated, Starbucks offered its customers a glimpse into the life of the coffee producer. Additionally, the package presented a snapshot of the relations of global capitalism. A side panel read:

> We believe there's a connection between the farmers who grow our coffees, us and you. That's why we work together with coffee-growing communities—paying prices that help farmers support their families and improve their farms, and funding projects like a health clinic in eastern Guatemala. It's all part of our commitment to sustainable growing practices and an equitable relationship with farmers that allows us to deliver superior coffee to you. By drinking this coffee, you're helping to make a difference.

With this text Starbucks describes the basic relations of production and consumption, and places an ethical frame around them by relaying its socially responsible business practices and philanthropic endeavours in this growing region. Starbucks assures its customers that the coffee is cultivated in an ecologically sustainable manner, and that the end result is a high-quality product. Further, Starbucks interpellates the customer as an ethical actor, who by virtue of a simple consumer choice facilitates social and economic change in a distant land.

Taken together, the images and text attached to this product struck me as a modern day iteration of the colonial travel narratives that were the focus of Said's analysis. This narrative is presented through the white tourist gaze, deploys imagery that appears ‘exotic’ to the viewer, cultivates a sense of distinction between the American consumer and Guatemalan producers and frames the capitalist relations between a northern corporation and southern producers as a form of benevolent intervention into producers’ communities. In this narrative, consumers are cast in the role of saviour, who, simply by purchasing the product, help suffering people who are seemingly incapable of helping themselves.

Shortly after my experience in Starbucks, I came across a sign in The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, another American coffee chain, which read ‘You’re not just buying coffee’. I wondered, what am I buying? The sign continued, ‘A portion of this sale is donated to help children grow through education in communities worldwide’. It seems then, that those who purchase coffee branded or certified as ‘the right choice’ purchase a certain image of a producer, a perceived connection to that person, and moral consumer subjectivity. This phenomenon is not limited to coffee. Today there are more and more products around us that are presented as ethical options. A walk through most American supermarkets reveals a wide variety of organic fare, free range and ‘cruelty free’ meat and eggs, sustainably farmed or wild caught salmon, and ‘green’ paper products made from recycled materials. We are inundated with advertisements...
for hybrid vehicles, sweatshop-free clothing and fairly traded goods of all shapes and sizes. Companies small and large, from the local independent coffeehouse, to Chevron and Walmart, tell us that purchasing their products is a vote for environmental sustainability, fair labour conditions and global economic justice.

Because of the diffusion of ethically coded goods in the American marketplace over the last decade, more and more scholars have turned their attention to the practice that has come to be known as ‘ethical consumption’. I use the term to describe a set of practices that manifest at the intersection of concerns about planetary sustainability, personal health, conditions of production and quality of life of labourers. Some scholars prefer the term ‘political consumption’, and frame the practice as a new form of political action, while others emphasize a connection between consumption and civic responsibility, and thus favour ‘consumer citizenship’. Those of us who use ‘ethical consumption’ emphasize the grounding of ethics in everyday consumer practices (Lewis and Potter, 2011: 10). Further, from a research perspective, I find it important to not presuppose the phenomenon to be a political act, or a form of civic engagement.

What is sociologically interesting about the phenomenon of ethical consumption is that it signals shifts in the cultural logic of global capitalism. Shifts in business practices and sourcing models, and the messaging that accompanies these, indicate that the corporate world has become hip to consumer concerns, and has re-conceptualized these concerns into a new market of opportunity. With the diffusion of ethically coded products in the marketplace came the mainstreaming of an ideology of ethical capitalism, and a discourse of ethical consumption. Ethical consumption has risen dramatically over the last decade, which signals shifts in contemporary American values, identities and consumer practices. This fact also raises questions about the reproduction of the system of global capitalism, since the practice reflects critical awareness of social, environmental and economic problems associated with the system.

With the research presented in this chapter, I offer a culturally grounded analysis of ethical consumption and its relationship to global capitalism. Through surveys and interviews with consumers of ethical coffee, I illuminate the dominant approaches to practising ethical consumption, and the personal and collective motivations that move people towards it. This research, thus, reveals the ideology that organizes the practice, and advances understanding of the contemporary cultural logic of global capitalism within the United States. While consumerist lifestyles and identities are now spreading to regions of the world where these have historically not dominated culture (Mathur, 2010), the United States, as the world’s leading consumer nation, continues to be a harbinger of trends in consumerism. If the logic of consumerism is tipping towards ethics in the United States, it is important to understand why and how, and what positive or negative effects might come of this, so that social scientists and policy makers can shape the future of the practice.

Theoretical Debates Surrounding Ethical Consumption

When considering this contemporary trend, many scholars note that forms of ethical consumption have existed for nearly as long as have consumer markets. However, there is also consensus that there are differences in today’s ethical consumption that render it unique, and specifically situated within our contemporary historical moment. Lewis and Potter (2011: 5) point out that the ‘problematization of living’ common in contemporary Western societies, and the address of it through consumer channels, is what distinguishes ethical consumption today from prior forms. By ‘problematization of living’, Lewis and Potter refer to popular
awareness in Western nations that there are problems associated with the consumerist lifestyle that dominates social and economic life. People in these nations are increasingly aware of the harmful environmental, social and economic consequences of global capitalist production and consumption. Many now attempt to address their discomfort and anxieties caused by this twenty-first century reality by expressing an ethical agency through consumer channels. Because such concerns are addressed through consumption, Lewis and Potter emphasize the ‘ordinariness of ethics’ that is expressed by this practice (p. 10). Bringing ethics into consumer decisions is a sign that ethical concerns are now infused into everyday life in Western societies, and have been mainstreamed into today's consumer terrain. Given this fact, the central debate among scholars of consumption is whether the practice has any real political purchase.

The most virulent critics of ethical consumption argue that it cannot even exist, is in fact oxymoronic, in a capitalist society. Monbiot (2007) asserts that capitalism is inherently unethical because it is premised on the exploitation of labour, which negates the existence of ethical consumption. Bauman (2008) also views the practice as a contradiction in terms because he reasons that a ‘society of consumers’ is inhospitable to ethical subjectivities. Guthman (2008) found in her research of food politics and consumption in California that at best, ethical consumption manifests as a neoliberal subjectivity that does nothing more than provide the cultural logic for harmful neoliberal economic and development policies. Others see the radical promise of ethical consumption, yet caution against the ability of the practice to relieve liberal guilt caused by awareness of global social and economic problems through market-based solutions, without effecting any real change (Cook and Crang, 1996; Featherstone, 2011).

Some point out that what were initially ‘alternative’ models of sourcing and consuming have been co-opted and watered down through processes of mainstreaming that folded transnational corporations (TNCs) into the mix (Raynolds and Long, 2007). The inclusion of TNCs afforded greater marketing power to ethical goods, often with the help of celebrities, and thus raised their profile during the 2000s. However, Goodman (2010) points out that this ‘celebritization of development’ created so much demand for ethical goods that the shortened commodity chain, the founding hallmark of ethical trade, was sacrificed for market growth. Inclusion and growth has raised questions about the sincerity of ethical claims, and prompted concern about the potential ‘green’ and ‘white’ washing of corporate business as usual. Finally, some point out that the ‘responsibilization’ of individual consumers both justifies and reinforces the neoliberal dismantling of social services and of corporate regulations, which vanishes the responsibility of the state to protect human and civil rights (Littler, 2009).

Yet, for as much criticism of ethical consumption that exists, there are those who champion the practice and its potential to enact social and economic change. Micheletti (2003) argues that consumption can empower the average citizen to take responsibility for themselves and their society. Because of this, she views the practice as a reinvention of politics and democracy in the context of a ‘post-political world’ (p. 14). From her vantage point, ethical consumption broadens the scope of policymaking by more readily including the concerns of the general population. Viewed as political engagement, the expression of social and environmental concerns through consumption pressures TNCs to be more responsible actors on the global stage (Micheletti and Stolle, 2008).

Still, some find these claims hard to swallow. Low and Davenport point out that ‘business only has to move as far and as fast as consumers want and there is little onus on business to “create” change, internally or externally’ (2008: 325). Goodman (2010) critiques the model of
salvation through market development on the grounds that it only works for those who can produce something of value, like a pleasant image and reassuring narrative, in the eyes of northern consumers. Further, some problematize that the logic of ethical consumption—do good by consuming—serves to more deeply entrench consumerism as the cultural dominant, as opposed to encouraging a critical dialog around its negative effects (Low and Davenport, 2008). To this end, Lewis and Potter (2011) distinguish between ‘consumption’ and ‘consumerism’ when weighing the merits of an ethical approach to purchasing. They point out that those who assert ethical consumption is oxymoronic for its relationship to capitalism are actually critiquing ‘consumerism’, not the practice of consumption. They conceptualize ‘ethical consumption’ as a term that can apply to a range of practices that can operate in alternative economic systems (p. 29).

Taking both sides into consideration, it seems that the crux of this scholarly debate is whether ethical consumption operates within the normative system of global capitalist production and consumption, or whether it operates outside of, and thus challenges, the system. The question, then, is whether ethical consumption is merely an adaptation of consumer culture to our contemporary moment, or if it is an attempt at reforming it. I see the pressing question as one of consciousness. While above-mentioned intellectual critiques and affirmations are well taken, there is, admittedly, a conspicuous lack of research that evaluates the cultural resonance of ethical products, and interrogates the universe of knowledge that surrounds the practice. To fill this void, my research with consumers of ethical coffee seeks to reveal both the personal and social significance of the practice. I pose the following questions: (i) What consumer values, desires, and identities does an ideology of ethical capitalism both respond to and interpellate? (ii) What is expressed and reproduced through ethical consumption? (iii) What is the relationship between an ethical consumer identity and the system of global capitalism?

**Background: Ethical Coffee in the United States**

I use the term ‘ethical coffee’ to encompass a variety of sourcing models now practised by coffee companies, large and small, within the United States, and to refer to any coffee that is certified or marketed as the ‘right choice’ with regard to environmental and social concerns. This loose definition encompasses both independent third party certification models, and internally monitored, company-specific models of ethical sourcing. Today, the most widely distributed, well known, and consumed model is Fair Trade certified (Barrientos et al., 2007). TransFair USA, now Fair Trade USA, launched the label in the United States in 1998, and since then it has become a standard bearer within the coffee industry, and a prototype for certification of other goods. The power of its marketing campaigns has resonated with consumers to such an extent that they tend to use the term to refer to ethical coffee in general (Murray and Raynolds, 2007; Renard and Peréz-Grovas, 2007).

Beyond Fair Trade, other major ethical sourcing models include Organic certified, which is commonly coupled with Fair Trade in the United States, The Rainforest Alliance certified, UTZ certified, and 4C Common Code (Specialty Coffee Association of America, 2010). In addition, many companies, particularly multinational corporations such as Starbucks and The Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf, have their imports independently verified as ethically sourced (though not certified), and also partner with NGOs on socially responsible initiatives in producing communities (Grodnik and Conroy, 2007). Beyond certification, many smaller, independent roasters and coffee companies within the specialty coffee industry employ internal, company-specific sourcing models that are commonly referred to as ‘direct trade’ or ‘relationship coffee’. Though not externally verified, such models feature transparent and very short commodity
chains, long-term relationships between producers and buyers, use of a quality-based price scale and an emphasis on helping producers improve the quality of their product.

Coffee was in fact the first consumer good to be surrounded by a framework of ethical certification (Raynolds and Long, 2007; Renard and Peréz-Grovás, 2007), which no doubt contributes to its current mainstream status in American society. In 2007, a telephone survey conducted by the National Coffee Association found that sixty percent of American adults are aware of at least one model for ethically sourcing coffee (National Coffee Association, 2007). At its outset, ethical coffee in the United States was particular to the specialty coffee sector, which is loosely defined as dealing exclusively in coffees of exceptional quality. In 2009, this sector made 13.65 billion USD in sales, which equals about a third of total national coffee sales (Bolton, 2009). Signalling both the desire for premium coffee, and the attractiveness of ethical coding, the annual average growth rate of the specialty sector is four times greater than that of conventional coffee within the United States, and was projected to exceed 18 billion USD in sales by 2012 (Bolton, 2009). And, due to its inclusion of TNCs, sales of Fair Trade certified coffee more than doubled annually between 2000 and 2007 (Grodnik and Conroy, 2007). Industry analysts Pierrot and Giovannucci (2010) reported that ‘no other segment of the global coffee industry has grown as consistently and as fast as the one for coffees that are certified as sustainable’ (p. 3). In fact, coffee is now the most widely traded and consumed ethically certified product (Renard and Peréz-Grovás, 2007).

No doubt, it is the long, exploitative labour history of coffee production that made it an appealing crop for the introduction of ethical sourcing and certification. This history is one of colonial enslavement, indentured servitude on plantations and post-emancipation, impoverished peasant farmers exploited at the hands of middlemen and large transnational corporations (Pendergrast, 1999; Talbot, 2004, 2011; Topik, 2010; Wild, 2004). Because coffee has been traded as a commodity, producers have faced the uncertainty of extreme price fluctuation, and throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, have had neoliberal development schemes imposed on them (Talbot, 2011). This history makes coffee not only an attractive commodity for ethical treatment, but also, a prime case for a culturally grounded analysis of ethical consumption. Because it is the most widely consumed ethically coded product, it is likely to include a more diverse cross-section of consumers than other ethical products on the market, and to include those who apply an ethical lens to other consumer decisions. It stands to reason that a snapshot of consumers of ethical coffee is a reasonable equivalent to a snapshot of ethical consumers in contemporary American society. And, because it is primarily an import product in the United States, and is produced overwhelmingly by people of races other than white, it is an excellent case for considering the raced relations of today’s global system of capitalist production and consumption.

Research Settings and Methods

This study was conducted between 2007 and 2009 in Seattle, Washington, Portland, Oregon and in San Francisco and Santa Barbara, California. All cities are located along the west coast of the United States, and were chosen because they represent the contemporary base of both production and consumption of ethical coffee within the nation, and for their histories as key sites in the development of the specialty coffee industry. Additionally, these locations are ideal sites for research into ethical consumption because they are known for their popular embrace of alternative lifestyles, and are oriented towards socially and environmentally responsible politics and business.

To take the ideological pulse, so to speak, of ethical coffee consumers, I conducted surveys
and interviews with participants across these locations. Thirty-two interview participants self-identified in response to advertisements posted at over 250 coffeehouses. In the field I approached patrons of coffeehouses and solicited survey participation, which yielded 144 survey respondents. Participants who completed the two-page survey responded to questions pertaining to their knowledge of ethical coffee sourcing models, and their motivations for patronizing the coffeehouses they do. With interview participants, I held one-on-one conversations ranging from 30 minutes to 1 hour in length. Topics included awareness of ethical coffee, level of commitment to it, reasons for purchasing it, and understanding of how ethical sourcing models affect producers. In addition, we discussed ethical consumption beyond coffee, and their attitudes towards large corporations, small businesses and global capitalism. Interview and survey data were then hand coded and analysed together to identify dominant discursive and ideological patterns.

Overview of Sample Population

Participants in this research are mostly white, middle class, college educated, younger adults, with an average age of thirty-two and half years old. Slightly more are married or partnered than not, and about a third have children. Politically speaking, they skew from centrist to left. About a third are religious, though most of them do not participate regularly in religious events or observances. All are regular consumers of coffee, both at home and in coffeehouses. Most regularly purchase ethical coffee, and select coffeehouses in part based on whether it is served. Notably, nearly a third of interview participants stated that they choose to shop at businesses that serve strictly ethical coffee, thus, eliminating ethics from the decision-making process once they are in the establishment. Many overall exclude or avoid certain locations or businesses due to an absence of ethical options.

In terms of general consumer concerns and awareness, a preference for local products and purchasing directly from producers was expressed by a majority of participants. Some exude an anti-corporate and anti-chain mentality, and prefer to support small, independent businesses. About half prefer to buy organic products due to concerns for the environment, and processes of industrial and large-scale food production. They express a host of concerns related to ecological sustainability, including excessive fuel and energy consumption and the importance of decreasing waste, particularly in terms of plastics, product packaging, shipping and industrial pollution. Thus, many support producing with recycled materials, buying used, and reusing and repurposing goods. In sum, they bring a wide range of ethical concerns to consumption.

Research Findings

Clear trends emerged in interviews and surveys with consumers of ethical coffee. Participants are critical of mainstream American consumerism, and this provides the basic impetus towards ethical consumption. They express an awareness of the privileges they enjoy in comparison to those who produce the goods they consume, and experience feelings of guilt and responsibility because of this. These too serve as motives that coalesce into a dyadic strategy of ethical consumption: do good, and avoid doing harm. Because producers exist in very troubled communities in the American imaginary, participants articulate an interventionist definition of ethical trade that seeks to correct injustices taking place in distant lands. But despite their belief in the power of ethical consumption to effect positive social, economic and environmental change, they experience nagging anxieties about its realities and potential. In what follows, I rely on statements by interview participants to extrapolate these trends. While
survey results are included in the description of the sample population provided earlier, they are only included in the following section when specifically stated.

Attitudes Towards Consumption

In providing context for why they purchase ethical coffee, many describe problems of mainstream American consumer norms and values. They recognize that American mass consumption patterns produce negative consequences around the world, and consequently feel a responsibility to be a part of a solution, and to the extent that they can avoid reproducing the problem. Nearly half of all interview participants levelled overt critiques at consumerism. Of those, many construed the problem as over-consumption, and bemoaned the pull of consumer desires, like Kate who lamented the fact that ‘Things run things’ in our society. Similarly, David described himself in juxtaposition to his perception of mainstream consumerism. He said,

I don't think it's that important to keep up with the Joneses. I think having a nice place to live, a good place to educate my children, access to health care, access to public transportation and good roads, and a safe place to live are the most important things.

What David suggests is there are things that he values above the lifestyle and image that comes with consumerism, and they reflect the basic rights that citizens of the United States are supposed to enjoy. Relatedly, some assert that the American standard of living is higher than is economically sustainable or socially responsible. Karen explained that she had recently had a conversation with her boyfriend about why people were not buying gasoline when prices had spiked, but that they were still living their lives and getting by, and that ultimately this situation was better for the environment. This observation prompted her to ask, ‘Would it really be that bad if people couldn't afford gas? Would it really be that bad if McDonald's raised all their prices and people couldn't afford to buy it anymore?’ Karen’s observation and questions suggest that positive changes would come of Americans adjusting their consumption habits in response to the rising cost of resources.

As a solution to this problem, many describe buying used goods and reducing consumption as ways to help abate the problems they see in the world, like Kristin, who said, ‘It's the one thing I feel people can do to curb consumption, and to not be a part of the problem of mass consumption’. Kate explained that it is hard to find goods whose production didn't negatively affect someone, so she consumes very little as a consequence. When discussing how she came to a radical anti-consumerist perspective, Morgan explained that her adolescent rebellion was a rejection of the way of life that surrounded her. She spiritedly communicated to me her teenaged internal monologue: ‘Screw capitalism! Screw consumerism!’ Sentiments like these are representative of participants' identification of the problematic consequences of consumption of resources, the waste that is generated by consumerism, and the often negative health implications of mass consumer practices. Ultimately, participants critique what they perceive as normal in the American context—the singular importance of goods as they relate to image and lifestyle. They critique the over-consumption of resources, and assert that normative American consumption is unsustainable and irresponsible. Importantly, they position themselves as different from the norm, as a distinctly different kind of consumer, in order to create space for an ethical consumer subjectivity.

Awareness, Guilt and Responsibility
For those I interviewed, with awareness of problems associated with consumerism come feelings of guilt and a sense of responsibility. Many conveyed this when they explained why they purchase ethical products, like Morgan, who said that it is consumers’ responsibility ‘to demand goods that are good for our conscience’. Lucia echoed this sentiment, saying ‘...we're the one's buying it. If we don't buy it, they won't make it’. Connected to awareness of the consequences of one's choices is recognition of one's positionality. Some state that it is important to recognize the privileged position that they inhabit as US consumers, particularly in relation to global producers of goods. Eddie explained it is important that people realize they have a stake in producing social injustice. Similarly, Robert said, regarding the disparity between the global north and south, ‘To have that kind of inequality, somebody else has to suffer’.

Such statements reveal awareness of the economic and social connections between Americans, and those who produce the coffee that we consume, and that these connections often have harmful consequences for producers and their communities. This level of awareness often leads to feelings of guilt. Thus, some explain that a sense of guilt and desire to make reparations fuels their purchase of ethical coffee. Referencing the historical legacy of ‘various forms of imperialism’ in coffee producing nations, Carrie asked, ‘Don't we owe ‘em?’ Christopher drove the point home when he exclaimed in exasperation, ‘You can't tell suffering people to just wait for the revolution to come, and you know, all of their problems will be solved!’

These participants express recognition of injustice, and a sense of responsibility to address it as consumers. This implies confidence in the power of consumption to be the solution to problems identified, and to salve the guilt they feel. Ethical consumption is a solution that is immediately available to them in their everyday lives, so they experience it as an immediate act of change making. This is a gratifying experience, evidenced by the fact that many state that purchasing ethical coffee feels good. Sadie said, ‘It makes me feel good. Like, I'm getting the things that I need and I'm actually helping somebody in the process’. Evelyn said that after a purchase she thinks, ‘This bag did somebody good’. Dean said that he ‘like[s] being able to make a difference’, while Brenda said that now that her son is grown and out of the house that she and her husband ‘have more disposable income to do things we feel good about’.

Clearly, participants experience ethical consumption as a feelgood way of fulfilling their needs through consumerism, which they view as otherwise problematic. Ethical products thus afford participants the opportunity to avoid ‘bad’ consumer choices and practices, and allow them to embody and express a moral consumer subjectivity. Ethical coffee thus responds to and assuages, to a certain extent, the anxieties that participants feel due to their awareness of global inequalities, and their culpability in producing them.

An Ethical Strategy of Consumption

Participants want their choices to produce good, not harm and suffering, and believe that purchasing ethical coffee is a way to achieve this dyadic strategy. Kate put quite simply the power of ethical coffee to achieve this when she said, ‘We provide livelihood to farmers by drinking Fair Trade coffee’. Brenda, on the other hand, framed ethical consumption as avoidance: ‘People are not suffering to produce the thing we enjoy’. Similarly, Robert explained, ‘I wasn't worried too much about exploiting Ethiopian farmers until somebody mentioned, ‘Hey, you know there is such a thing as not exploiting them’, and then I began to get with the program’, while Abby said, ‘I just don't like people suffering, or people's lives to
go bad because of my personal choices’.

This strategy of avoidance stood out in survey results too. Of the 114 respondents who reported that they intentionally avoid certain coffeehouses, nearly 70 per cent listed an ethical concern first. Whether consumers take a casual or thoughtful approach to purchasing, it is clear that they believe in the promise of ethical sourcing models. In fact, many believe that consumer choice is the only thing that matters to businesses, and thus the only thing capable of changing business practices. Samuel pointed out that Brita, the popular purveyor of water filtration devices, now recycles its filters because of consumer demand. Because they believe in this model, about a third of those who specifically advocated consumer-driven change stated that they are willing to pay more to make an ethical purchase, like Scott, who said, ‘For me, it would be worth paying more money so that folks are getting their fair share of the wealth’.

These statements reveal that the foundational logic of ethical consumption is to avoid harmful consequences, and to promote good when making purchases. This strategy of avoidance seems an extension of the tradition of consumer boycotts, but is also reflective of a history of expressing identity through consumption. Participants support the concept of producing social change through consumption, and so implicitly support the notion that positive social change can be produced through the capitalist system. The immediate problems then from the perspective of participants are unethical consumption, and greedy corporations who exploit labourers and the environment, not the capitalist system.

The Coffee Producer in the American Consumer Imaginary

For consumers of ethical coffee, what makes coffee ethical is directly juxtaposed against the poor and difficult conditions they imagine to result from the low wages and exploitative forces and actors, which they know to be true in the typical coffee growing community. This popular image of producing communities, and the suffering experienced within them, fuels the desire to do good and avoid doing harm expressed by participants. For them, coffee can be labelled ‘ethical’ when it either avoids producing, or responds to, problematic conditions. They envision coffee producers living in impoverished conditions that result from oppressively low wages, exploitation by large corporate buyers, inept and corrupt local and national governments, and political instability throughout their regions. They imagine that producers labour under very poor conditions. Overall, they identify a complex and deeply troubled set of social, economic and political circumstances that plague coffee producing communities.

Many cite bad labour conditions and underpayment as hallmarks of traditional coffee production, like Roderick, who stated,

> My assumption is that the conditions tend to be horrendous in less fair places. And the wages would go hand-in-hand. If the conditions are bad, I'm assuming the wages are bad. I think that conditions would horrify me more than wages … long hours, children working.

Lucia, familiar with the struggles of farm workers in California, explained that she imagines that the experiences of coffee producers is similar to that of field labourers who endure long hours of back-breaking labour under the hot sun, only to receive low pay and abuse due to their immigration status. She emphasized that agricultural labour is very physically demanding, time consuming and typically under-compensated.
How participants imagine conditions of labour at the site of production tends to manifest as in conflict with labour laws within the United States. Yet, they tend to associate these conditions with the parts of the world in which coffee is grown. According to David, ‘The worst imaginable place in the United States is the Hilton compared to some of these places’. Some participants explain that these problems are a result of internal conditions in coffee producing nations, such as a lack of labour laws, inept or corrupt governments, and political instability. Using coded language to describe the situation, Drake said ‘Coffee comes from a Third World nation, from Central America. I'm sure that the farmers and labourers involved work hard and are probably not compensated well for it’. Lily explained that coffee ‘[is] grown in really tough parts of the world … places that are politically complicated’. These imaginaries of coffee growing communities reflect common northern tropes that frame formerly colonized lands as ‘Third World’ or ‘developing’, which suggest that these places are unfinished, and deficient when compared with the United States and other Westernized nations.

Within this conceptualization, internal governments and their leaders are often cast as facilitators of bad conditions. Sadie expressed this when she said, ‘[The] governments don't take care of people, quality of life is low, and governments cater to big US corporations’. Jim explained, ‘In Colombia and Guatemala, they have unstable governments, problems with revolutionaries battling counter-revolutionaries, civil war and innocents slaughtered’. While Sadie connects the problems in coffee growing countries to the goals and actions of US corporations, overwhelmingly participants conceptualize such problems as rooted in the communities they describe, like Jim does.

Participants also fault exploitation of farmers by middlemen and large buyers. Scott invoked the struggle of the Immokalee farm workers with Taco Bell when he explained, ‘[Large buyers] can bully farm workers because they'll work for less than minimum wage. They work like indentured servants’. Pointing to another problem coffee producers experience as a result of the power of large buyers, Christopher said, ‘The mainstream coffee market really serves to isolate and pit farmers against each other’. Thus, despite awareness of their positionality and privilege, they do not view problems in producing communities as embedded in a world-system of capitalist production and consumption, but as a result of select bad actors within those communities.

Notably, this popular imaginary of coffee producers and their communities paints them as victims who presumably do not resist. Thus, the vision of coffee growing communities that emerges out of the ethical consumer imaginary is one populated by disempowered peasant farmers who are exploited by local political elites and buyers, and who suffer the consequences of inept and corrupt governing bodies. These conditions are overwhelmingly understood as particular to these places, and not connected to how we live in the United States.

**Ethical Consumption as Benevolent Intervention**

Participants rely on several key factors to define ethical trade. First and foremost, they invoke money to define it, using terms like ‘living wage’ and ‘fair wage’ to explain what makes ethically sourced coffee distinct from the mainstream. Some discuss this in terms of profit share, and many flag equity and a balance of power as necessary for ‘fair’ trade. Conditions of labour also figure prominently in how participants define ethical trade, as is clear in the previous description of how participants imagine problems within producing communities. In what follows, I focus on two themes that encapsulate all of these concerns: the environmental and economic sustainability of farms and communities, and producer quality of life.
Participants explain that farm and community sustainability are important markers of ethical sourcing, and are required for ensuring that producers enjoy a minimum quality of life. Participants point to these relations when they state that a ‘sustainable livelihood’ is a sign of ethical trade. It logically follows then that consumers believe that farm sustainability is directly tied to environmental sustainability. Evelyn expressed this when she said,

… what I'm hoping for is that … the farmer on the picture … [is] getting good wages, that they're able to grow their coffee in a way that makes sense to the soil, to the area where the coffee is being grown, and that they're getting a fair price for their coffee. And a fair price would mean whatever the margins are that would make sense for them to continue their practices.

Others state that producers are better off when education is made available for children, and when children are not required to work. Many point to availability of food and water, to housing, and to good health and health care as conditions of an ethical situation. Participants expect that with larger income, the ability to meet basic necessities of survival follows. Lily explained that ensuring the availability of food, shelter, clean water and education ‘seems only fair’. She stated, ‘If we’re going to buy something from that part of the world, those people would have the same things [as us]’. And, some connect quality of life directly to wages, like Kristin who said producers should ‘Absolutely have the basic necessities, the human necessities of life, shelter, education, food and water. Access to all of those. To have that be guaranteed by the wage’. David explained how increased wages trickle down to bolster a community: ‘By increasing the compensation for the employees and improving the working conditions, it will provide them with additional funding which will bring additional services to their communities to make life better for them.’

With these statements participants identify key elements that define ethical coffee sourcing from their perspective: fair price and wages, equitable relations of trade, environmentally sustainable growing practices and the resulting sustainability of the farm. These statements also present a stark contrast to the popular image of ‘unethical’ coffee production offered by participants: low prices and wages, exploitative relations of trade, concern only for production volume and an impoverished, subsistence level existence. As they understand it, ethical sourcing models respond to the problems that plague growing communities by paying more, adjusting the relations and conditions of production and trade and ultimately, create thriving communities that want for nothing. This model positions consumers as saviours, and offers them the opportunity to inhabit ethical consumer subjectivity.

Anxieties and Contradictions

Those who participated in this research are not full-blown supporters, neither ideologically nor practically, of ethical models of sourcing and production. About a third point out that they have to protect their economic self-interest, and so can't do as much as they might like, given the price premiums of many ethical products. Others explain that buying ethically can sometimes require more time in research and travel to where such goods are available, and so ethical consumption is sometimes more of a hassle than they are willing to tolerate. Regarding this, Natalie said, ‘It has to be convenient. Life is so complicated anyway and time is so short during the day, you do what you can in your little area’. When discussing his concerns besides coffee, Roderick explained, ‘It's so big that there's really no way for me to know where it's coming from in a timely way’. Describing that he hasn't achieved the ethical consumer status that he would like to, Jake said, ‘In an ideal world my relationship to things
would be more local, but I haven't gotten to that point yet.'

Some point out that models of ethical sourcing are steps in the right direction, though not solutions for producers around the world. Scott pointed to the contradictions that exist in the purchasing habits of ethical consumers when he said, ‘It’s great that folks can go and buy Fair Trade coffee, but what does that mean when they’re buying a lot of products that there aren’t mainstream alternatives for, like socks made in Taiwan?’ Because of the limitations they experience and the contradictions they see, some feel a sense of hopeless ambivalence towards social and environmental problems, and recognize that their ability to make change is limited. Reflecting on this, Dean said, ‘There’s a point where it does become paralyzing’.

No doubt, these sentiments are fuelled by the scepticism of labels and ethical sourcing models that nearly half of participants expressed. Many harbour concern that ethical claims are more marketing ploys or forms of ‘washing’ than they are indicative of real changes to relations of production and trade. Many also point out that labels have been co-opted by big business and thus have lost meaning and validity. Regarding agricultural products, Michael said, ‘Before it meant something certain, but now bigger farms are jumping on board and bending the rules, using fertilizers that shouldn’t be used’. Kristin revealed similar concerns: ‘It seems like the terms or labels have been watered down. I wonder how true Starbucks’ claims are. Now you can find organic Cheerios and major food companies are creating organic stuff. How is it that it's organic?’

Concern for a lack of transparency of sourcing models is another key concern of participants, who admit that they are not certain that they can trust the claims of the businesses they patronize. Lance explained that the direct trade company from which he buys green coffee for home roasting revealed some problems associated with the Fair Trade model in their monthly newsletter. Of this, he said, ‘A lot of times the dollars really don't filter down to the actual growers’. Similarly, Brenda admitted that she is sceptical that the model is as good as labels make it out to seem.

With statements like these participants reveal the material and ideological constraints in their lives that shape their ability and desire to pursue ethical consumption. Money and time are limited resources, and they must protect their own economic self-interest and quality of life. Their awareness of corporate bad-actors and mainstream co-optation has raised their suspicions about the sincerity of the claims of those touting ethical business practices and sourcing models. Some of them feel overwhelmed by the many ethical options on the market and the multitude of global social and environmental problems that these options signify. Yet, they consistently purchase ethical coffee, which suggests that despite their scepticism and the contradictions they see in ethical consumption, they believe that consuming for change is what they can do as individuals to make a positive impact on the world.

**Conclusion**

This research reveals that ethical consumers believe in the power of consumer-driven change. They deploy a dyadic strategy of consumption that targets goods that are marketed as the ‘right’ choice, and avoid goods that are associated with corporate bad actors. They frame ethical coffee as the ‘right’ choice because they believe it ensures fair prices to producers, fair wages to labourers, provides for good labour conditions, an acceptable community-wide quality of life and environmental and economic sustainability. Despite the scepticism that some harbour for corporate claims, consumers read ethical coffee as an effective response to the political and economic problems that they perceive to be endemic to ‘Third World’ and
‘developing’ nations. Ultimately, they view ethical coffee as a tool of empowerment and change. As consumers with resources and knowledge, they are empowered to change the lives of producers through their consumption choices. They inhabit a moral consumer subjectivity.

Yet despite recognition of problems in coffee growing communities, the situatedness of these within a system of capitalist production and consumption, and the history of this system, goes unrecognized by the vast majority. Disparities in wages due to unjust hierarchies of race and nationality are overlooked, and so it is presumed that because ethical sourcing levels the playing field of the global economy, it gives producers the resources they need to succeed within it. Ethical consumers are unaware that not all producers welcome this kind of benevolent intervention. Many have resisted neoliberal models of development and aid (Neilson and Pritchard, 2007), have objected to the inclusion of transnational corporations and plantations in ethically certified sourcing models (Wilkinson and Mascarenhas, 2007), and have expressed discontent with certification fees and standards imposed from the north (Renard and Peréz-Grovas, 2007; Wilkinson and Mascarenhas, 2007). Often, producer demands for more representation on the boards of certification organizations have gone unheeded (Wilkinson and Mascarenhas, 2007). Further, the notion of ethical consumers reaching in to southern communities to solve their problems vanishes the producer-rooted origin of the Fair Trade system, which was called into being in Mexico as a counter force to the neoliberal globalization of trade (Murray and Raynolds, 2007; Renard and Peréz-Grovas, 2007). The negligible economic in-the-pocket difference between conventional and certified coffee is another reality not understood by consumers.

Given that most have only vague, surface level knowledge of how ethical sourcing models operate, and the realities of their effects in coffee communities, consumer concern ultimately manifests as well-intentioned reactionary purchasing. I see this as evidence of the successful commodification of morality. By disseminating a narrative that features happy producers who thrive due to the choices of consumers, the specialty coffee industry has successfully created a market for morality. Together the discourse and imagery that surrounds the product functions as a sign, in the Saussurian sense, of ethical relations of trade, which signals to the consumer that all is well and they have done the right thing (Saussure [1916] 1983). For these reasons I find it impossible to frame ethical consumption as it exists today as political action or progressive social change.

That said, the genuine concern for the welfare of producers, for global justice, and for planetary sustainability shine through as lights of hope in our contemporary culture. Implicit in ethical consumption is a critique of the dominant relations of global capitalism and the behaviour of large corporations. This is expressed through the construction of ‘villains’ in consumer discourse on the problems of today’s world, and is representative of heightened awareness of the abuses of the system, against which some businesses are framed as ‘ethical’. Consumer unease with these conditions is expressed also in the guilt they articulate over not doing more to be ethical actors, shaped by the real material constraints on their own lives—making the ‘right’ choice often costs more. This is certainly a critical orientation.

The interviews I conducted with consumers, however, revealed that awareness of problems often mushrooms to overwhelming proportions, which generates feelings of hopelessness and ambivalence. For many, awareness is an unfolding process, during which knowledge of corporate abuses builds up, in part due to the marketing of goods as ethical. As awareness grows, so does their understanding of the social-systemic scope of the problem. For some, this produces hopelessness because they feel that no matter what they do, problems will
This can result in an ambivalent orientation towards ethical consumption and other politically effective modes of social change.

The act of purchasing an ethically coded good, such as Fair Trade or ‘Farm Direct’ coffee, offers a momentary alleviation of the postmodern stress and anxiety that many US consumers feel. When the situation seems hopeless, making the ‘right’ consumer choice is an available action that resonates with immediacy. The product tells consumers that their act starts a chain reaction of goodness that trickles down to producers in the global south. I suggest then, that the anxieties and critical impulses that tip US consumers towards ethical goods are dampened by the act of ethical consumption. This means that ethical consumption of goods represents an adaptation of consumerism to our contemporary historical moment, not a challenge to it, nor to the norms of global capitalism.

Despite this, I believe that hope lies in the unease, the anxiety, and the discomfort that pushes consumers to harbour suspicions of the relations and conditions of production. But if we are to make moves towards real social change and global economic justice, we must embrace our anxieties, not assuage them through the self-gratifying channels of consumption. To the extent that we opt for the simple fix of ethical consumption we fail to actually confront the root of the problem that causes these anxieties—the system of capitalism—and instead we reproduce the very thing that troubles us. We must meet the challenge of thinking outside the iron cage of global capitalism. Only then can we imagine social justice into being.

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