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## The consumer as citizen: the role of ethics for a sustainable consumption

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### Abstract

The role of ethics, even in its absence, is essential in the economic discourse, despite its shifting through different theories. From the political Aristotelian tradition to the recent reflection about the concept of postmodern society – through the theory of maximizing the personal interest belonging to Utilitarianism– the moral questions and its dilemma, either accepted or rejected as *non sense*, have always indicated the directions to the human acts.

This paper is focused on consumption field seen as the favourite place where emerge all the contradictions of ethical human behaviour (in terms of choice, moral obligations, individual interests etc).

Firstly, the foundations of consumer’s ethical responsibility is explored by addressing the changes from Modernity to Postmodernity and their alternative models of consumption.

It is argued that, paradoxically, the traces of “liquid society” with the fall of social structure, represent the beginning for developing a new kind of consumer defined as *citizen* who is able to embrace a sustainable and moral concept of consumption focused on collective well-being.

Secondly, after having defined the main features of ethical consumer, the paper addresses the role of ethics as the element which makes possible the communication between the two spheres of production and consumption. In this regard, following the dialectic between “rights” and “duties” articulated by Schrader, the responsibility of consumer is showed to be at the foundation of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

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## 1. From Modern to Postmodern Consumer: “liquidity” as an opportunity

As Amartya Sen argued in his most influential works (Sen 1987) the modern economics has been progressively detached from ethics and the moral instances which have been always considered by the classical tradition to be at the foundation of human actions.

In fact, in the classic and philosophical thought the reflection above politics and economics behaviour sprung from the public acceptance of moral normatives freely respected by all the citizen who shared the same goal: the pursuit of a sovereign Good.

As Aristotles says in *Nicomachean Ethics*:

«the end of this science (= politics) must include the ends of all the others. Therefore, the Good of man must be the end of the science of Politics. [8] For even though it be the case that the Good is the same for the individual and for the state, nevertheless, the good of the state is manifestly a greater and more perfect good, both to attain and to preserve.<sup>1</sup>To secure the good of one person only is better than nothing; but to secure the good of a nation or a state is a nobler and more divine achievement» (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b, 8)

Ethics and Politics were naturally tied up because every human beings was, firstly, a citizen. It doesn't mean that Aristotles ignored the human nature and its difficulties striving for being a good citizen ("what is common to the greatest number has the least care bestowed upon it. Everyone thinks chiefly of his own, hardly at all of the common interest", *Politics*, book II, chapter 3). Understanding totally the limits of human will, the philosopher addressed the building up of the *polis* as the condition to realise the highest human ends. As we can see a kind of public ethics was at the foundation of every action.

The success of Utilitarianism (Ricardo, Mill, Smith) had opened to the falling down of ethical questions from the economics studies: according to the utilitarian tradition the human rational behaviour would be naturally focused on maximizing the individual interests and personal pleasure with no reference to any moral judgement coming from outside. By indentifying wellness with *utilities*, the pivotal idea of utilitarianism became the rationality of choice (see Sen 1987).

To sum up, the relationship between ethics and other practical disciplines, seems to be essential for developing the structure of human choice, either translated as political or economics action.

The same controversial shifting of ethical reflection occurs in the particular dimension of consumption. As the birth and the development of other great cultural concepts, the deep historical process relating to the change of social structure, determined the moral judgment towards consumption.

Fabris stresses the disappearance of the strict social hierarchy in modern time and the opening to the free choice of flexible lifestyles, as the pivotal factor for the upturning in the common evaluation of “consumption”(Fabris 2003).

Influenced by the marxist perspective, modernity has underestimated consumption as a dependent variable of “production” serving the needs of capitalism. Despite Marx states an interdependence between production and consumption («Production is thus at the same time consumption, and consumption is at the same time production. Each is simultaneously its opposite. But an intermediary movement takes place between the two at the same time. Production leads to consumption, for which it provides the material; consumption without production would have no object» Marx 1971), he recognizes an autonomous epistemological status to the former. The consumption is eventually considered the product of the increasing spiral of needs created by the cynical manipulation of capitalistic logic. As a result of this, consumption has become direct expression of social prestige and income as features belonging to upper middle class.

This version of consumption, as Fabris regards, reflects a kind of society strictly structured in classes: possessing commodities is directly both a claim to belonging to a specific class and the expression of its status (Fabris 2003). It means that each concept of consumption is redefined by the kind of society it represents. It explains why the

postmodernity is characterized by a completely different sort of consumption.

In fact in the last three decades the rigid boundaries among classes had fallen changing all the ideals supported by the previous society. Nowadays, in the so-called Postmodernity, social hierarchy and its stratifications have become weak and the identity is not determined by neither the prestige nor the economics income (Fabris 2003, Bauman 2000, Bauman 2008). In this new context described by Bauman, every bound is liquid, every relation is not unchangeable and consumption becomes the expression of the unlimited lifestyles.

Bauman argues that the lack of the authority leads each member of a community to search for his personal identity. When the social and established determinations falls, each citizen becomes an “orphan” and tries by himself to legitimate his social choices (Bauman 2008) or to emulate, through consumption, the idea of a lost “status” (Baudrillard 1998).

The postmodern consumers makes his choice in the *liquidity* of interchangeable lifestyles. Different interpretations about the individual as consumer rise from this precarious status. According to Beck, changing endlessly lifestyles is a typical sign of consumer’s *schizophrenia* who struggles to give himself an identity, becoming who he is not (Beck 1992). This remarkably critic position, common to either conservative elitists or liberal leftists, is pretty close to a traditional condemn of “Postmodernity” (Wilk, 2001), accused to be the era of a radical individualism and narcissistic choice. Therefore the consumption has been started to be looked at as the «product of self-involved individual lost from moral purpose» (Lasch 1979) and the surrogate of wholeness (Ewen 1976).

Unlike this tradition of thought, Fabris remarks the positive side of liquidity depicted as the prolific context for the birth of a new consumer who is free from social restrictions and eventually aware of his choice.

To sum up the «absence of a center» is the source of opposite conceptions of consumer. Following Bauman the irreversible postmodern individualism forges narcissist consumers who make choices that satisfy their personal interests. At the opposite side, choosing a lifestyle is a claim of belonging so it requires the legitimation of a public space and needs to be recognized by a group of people. Yet in the globalized and liquid contest, with the fall of social, national and financial boundaries, the public space converges with the whole world. As the politic arena becomes global, the consumer is asked to assume a planetary responsibility for the other, becoming eventually a «citizen».

## 2. The Consumer becoming a “Citizen”

The consumer as citizen is someone who makes purchasing choice in respect of the sustainable development of the world community. Environmental protection, social responsibility, labour security become his main criteria leading the act of buying. Nevertheless, personal satisfactions and individual interests are not removed but they become functional to the realisation of other most relevant aims. At this regard, a serious debate about consumer as citizen has to cope with some challenges relating «how to reconcile autonomy and responsibility, individual agency with collective obligations» (Barnett et al. 2005: 5). In other words we are called to reflect seriously about the relationship between how people want to live and how society should be organized (Slater 1997, 3).

As the previous description of liquid society has showed, the breakdown of the old established order is the starting point for increasing the awareness of the global dimension of both society and human agency. Some evidences show that our postmodern society has embraced a global engagement in sustainable development (Beck 2004, Kriegman 2006). Thanks to Internet that allows to provide information faster all around the world, as well as the spread of Forums and public debates focused on sharing ideas on justice and sustainability (for instance World Social Forum, NGO’s Forums, etc) and the growth of international research networks which influence a sustainable policy, the postmodernity demonstrates to face the challenges related to a global citizenship. This “new global identity” calls for a transformative systemic change which entails the adoption of new values (quality of life, human solidarity, environmental sustainability, etc) as the transformation of social relations and the strategies of governance (Kriegman 2006, Raskin et al. 2002). Actually the citizen, as a new consumer, is also aware that “globalization” means an increase of inequalities and imbalances as the interests of financial markets and different societies become planetary.

From the theory of the global citizenship to the practice of consumers’ethical behavior it is needed to make another step and it often happens that the starting declaration of principles is not followed by coherent actions. (for instance becoming more aware about the environmental pollution and his backwashes on the climate change does not often lead to a reduction of CO2 emissions through “green” cars).

Yet the food consumption field shows a relevant correspondence between values and practice. The research conducted by Censis and Coldiretti (2010) stresses how the new consumer is selective, competent and demanding for a better quality of the product. Studying their preferences in food consumption allows to draw the main features of postmodern consumer (Censis, Coldiretti 2010; Briamonte et al. 2010; Menghini et al. 2013).

The old logics of utilitarianism (dominated by a radical rationalism which leads to identifying wellbeing with personal utility) and the following paradigm of frenetic consumerism (in which prevails the idea of “opulence” and its dogma of gathering as more commodities as possible) are almost left by the new ethical consumer. According to most of last researches emerges a kind of consumer who chooses food products according some criteria far from the previous logics. The preferences accorded to food products with protected designation of origin, the increase in purchasing organic food and the interests toward fair trade products outline a consumer’s profile who pays more attention to health safety, labour security and sustainable food production. Through a more selective and demanding choice the postmodern consumer try to express himself and to communicate his desire of authenticity or his protest against something considered deceitful. In this regard, the freshness of *sushi* reflects the “authenticity” to which everybody tries to aspire, instead torn and bleached jeans are worn as act of protest (Fabris 2003).

Quality and typical products are the leading features of the ethical food consumer (Briamonte et al. 2010; Borrelli et al. 2011). The demand of a better food quality and local products reflect the new priority accorded to the environmental, economical and social sustainability. The increasing consumption of organic food is the sign of this new awareness. The success of organic food and the debate it rises over the dangers relating to the use of hazardous chemicals, pesticides, veterinary medicines, and additives, as well as any issues concerning experiments and consumption of genetically modified foods, address to a renovate interest towards the “safety” meant as a inner and deep interdependence between human health and environmental safety. Therefore consuming organic food is perceived as a choice of quality and a kind of environmental respect, preventing from its damage caused by the abuse of natural resource. Quality is guaranteed through many devices. Some of them are external means which facilitate the circulation of information such as Internet, Newspapers and Advertising campaigns. In addition there are different indicators of quality that relates to taste, healthiness of food (internal indicators) and others referring to the brand and the origin of products etc (external indicators).

Like the quality, the choice of typical products improves the economical and social dimension of sustainability. Consuming local food is a way of rewarding small rural businesses deep rooted in typical territorial contexts and therefore strengthening their income and protecting the develop of local labor.

In turn being typical requires additional conditions like the respect of local landscape, the natural resources integrity and the use of traditional techniques (Borrelli et al. 2011). Thanks to the legal regulation of labelling DOP and IGP many agricultural have started to pay more attention to the local origin as source of quality.

To sum up it is possible to argue that a global citizenship arise from the development of planetary transformations which refer to both the increasing awareness of social structure change and the spread of information through new technologies (Web, social forum etc) and corporate strategies of communication.

### **3. Ethics as a bridge between Production and Consumption**

For a long time, as we have argued before, production and consumption have been constantly considered two totally detached dimensions related to the life cycle of commodities. Each of these spheres were approached as serving opposite interests and modern times used to accord the priority to Production.

The postmodernity and its global transformations relating societies, environment and financial markets have rebalanced the two dimensions giving a central role to consumer’s behavior. What have made possible this new dialogue between production and consumption was ethics. If being focus on economic income, according to the business point of view, conflicts with requests of quality and low prices demanded by consumers, ethics allows to cast a new light on the relationship between them by strengthening their mutual influence.

In fact, being ethical by consumer’s side means to make purchasing choices which reflect a coherence with the vision of sustainable wellbeing they support. At the same time a company can revenge itself an ethical management if it is able to internalize in the product some positive features relevant for the wellbeing (Menghini et al.2013). These social and environmental aspects are normally outside of the product even if they are highly requested by the consumer. So their internalization would increase both the so-called ethical business, becoming the topical factor of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and the desired income.

In this regard the success of CSR was helped by the development of regulation and legislation which have played a part in raising consumer expectations of marketing behavior (Smith 1995)<sup>†</sup>. Nevertheless it is necessary to point out that the publicity of corporates codes of conduct as well as the assumption of ethical business strategies strongly depend on the consumer's awareness and on the pressure he puts on corporations and governments about the need for a more sustainable business ethics (Barnett et al 2005).

The increase of consumer's awareness opens to the issue of informative asymmetries that express the distance between productive system and consumers or, in other words, the difference among the objective "characteristics" of a product and his "attributes" subjectively perceived by the consumer through his knowledge and personal skills (Marinelli N. et al 2013, Marinelli N. 2010, Menghini et al 2011). The information asymmetries provoke some relevant market inefficiencies (Akerlof 1970, Nelson 1970, Darby e Karni 1973).

To prevent from the market failure every business is called to deal with three different kind of qualities which involve increasingly the sensorial and cognitive engagement of the consumer (Nardone G., et al 2006).

If the first class of characteristics (*search*) is easily perceivable by the consumer before the purchase and the second one (*experience*) can be discovered only after the purchase, it is the third class (*credence*) which rises an informative vacuum, between consumers and producers, which can be fought thanks to a business communication strategies involving labelling system as well as normative measures. As many researches stressed, the role of information has become essential in facing all these asymmetries (Barnett et al. 2005, Bateman et al. 2002).

It certainly is a company's duty to inform correctly about its products and its business conduct but at the same time every consumer, as a citizen, has to be educated in developing a «lifestyle choices and social involvement that contribute to greater transparency, better policies and increased advocacy» (CCN, 2005, p. 12). It means that a serious consumers' education is highly recommended and can be considered at the foundation of CSR. The relevance of education is proved by the activity of the Consumer Citizenship Network (CCN), an EU-funded network of researches, european organization (which also includes UNESCO and UNEP), which is focus on foster consumer education. As Schrader argues, the guidelines of Consumer Citizen Education drawn by CNN, give more importance to consumers' duties instead of his rights. Thus, reflecting on the dialectics rights/duties and rebalancing their role allow the behavioural scheme of a morally responsible consumer, giving at the same time the correct role to information (Schrader U., 2007).

According to Schrader the common contemporary theory about citizenship, though tries to stress the interdependencies between rights and duties, is eventually, slightly "republican", focusing on citizens' duties that must be executed actively and neglecting rights. Therefore Schrader, after having discussed the set of consumer's rights established by John F. Kennedy and deriving the corresponding duties from rights, tries to demonstrate that the extension of consumer's right is the precondition for executing consumer's duties. In other words, the three duties to be informed, to choose consciously and to make one self heard are derived from their corresponding rights. In addition, because of consumption can't be considered focused on personal needs satisfaction but as a political activity to support sustainability, it demands an extension of consumer's rights.

Starting with the right to be inform, its extension means to provide more versions of CSR information by labeling procedures and by strengthening consumers organisations that have started to take part on the realization of CSR test. Secondly a more availability of sustainable and ecological products affects the extension of right to choose, implementing the duty to choose consciously. That is what has started to occur in the field of nutrition: the organic food market has gone slowly towards prices decrease and, simultaneously, a broader distribution. An increasingly information availability on the healthiness and better taste have taken more consumers to choose organic food. To

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<sup>†</sup> As Carrigan highlights the ethics become essential on every level of marketing activity. The government anti-drug advertisement and the latest campaign to prevent from the risk of anorexia are examples of a new awareness developing around the media. Food manufactures are forced to explicit the content of their products, cigarettes firms have to admit the carcinogenic risk of smoking. Scholarly journals, universities and several research institutions are nowadays raise a debate about the social responsibility of marketing. (Carrigan, 2001).

sum up, the strengthening of consumer's rights facilitate a more responsible consumer's behavior and the execution of duties.

Futhermore Schrader seems to highlight that a more availability of information and of products could increase a socially sustainable conduct.

Yet it could be not enough or not totally true. In fact as some researches argue (Carrigan 2001) ethics and responsible behavior has to cope with also the weakness of human attitudes. It means that an informative campaign leaded by a company can develop the consumer's awareness stimulating his ethical perception but it does never have the last word on his deep attitudes and his final decision<sup>‡</sup>. As Carrigan highlights, the same amount of information forge either committed ethical consumers who decide to reward ethical firms and boycott offenders or other consumers who are completely indifferent to this problem (Carrigan, 2001).

It means that beside the informative asymmetries there is the asymmetrical influence of information on consumer's attitudes.

## Conclusion

To conclude it is possible to argue that the role played by ethics on defining consumer's behaviour strongly depends by our understanding of the inner "communitarian" dimension of human actions.

If ethics was essential in the premodern reflection, is because the *ancient* citizen of the *polis* – as Aristotles shows – strived for pursuing the sovereign common Good just because he recognized himself as belonging to the community of citizens.

The modern society still gave importance to the idea of community. Yet what has been left of the previous community was a strict social stratification without the pursuit of the common Good. Therefore the common schemes of collective identification followed the new rationalist thought: being a citizen had meant to serve personal interests and those one of the own class members.

Postmodernity opened with the fall of the social structure and the crisis of the previous schemes, cleaning away the old fixed boundaries. Deep inside the liquid society and the context of globalization, the individual became the citizen of the world. This new citizenship brings again the need of a planetary responsibility and the postmodern consumer, aware of the global implications of his choice, is called to be ethical.

Then the paper argued that ethics could be considered as a bridge between Production and Consumption reflecting on how the increase of consumer's awareness questions about the problem of informative asymmetries. Following Schrader we showed that the extension of consumer's rights – right to be informed, right to choose, rights to be oneself heard – can positively affect the sustainable consumer's behaviour. Nevertheless the debate about informative asymmetries does not explain itself the weakness of the ethical purchasing behavior because it entails a further discussion towards the relationship between the universal principles of ethical behaviour and personal attitudes.

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<sup>‡</sup> The report of *Is the future yours?* a research project on consumption models of young geerations conducted by Unep/Unesco in 2001, show the distance between knowlege and coherent behaviour and attitudes. In fact its results contribute to draw a profile of young people who is increasingly aware of the role of climate change, environmental pollution etc. on the development of sustainable lifestyles. Yet, at the same time, youngers have shown to blame on the international organisations and on the government's activity, disclosing their lack of responsibility.



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