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Paper: 125 ***Economy, Ecology, Society:*** ***The Importance of Class for the*** ***Sustainable Development Agenda***



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Abstract

This paper draws on a wider programme of work that explores the efforts of the sustainable development agenda to realise an equal balance of interaction between ecology, economy and society, and indeed, how such a balance may be achieved in light of the social diversity exhibited across regional, national and international contexts. More specifically, this paper addresses the continued relevance of class in contemporary British society and what this means for the accomplishment of equitable sustainability. To do so, I provide an outline of this ongoing theoretical and empirical project in which places of alternative food networking in South Wales are seen to represent sites for the distillation of different ‘capital’ resources within the wider social field as a means of maintaining boundaries of ‘distinction’. Crucially, I argue that there is a need – perhaps against dominant intellectual trends – for the social sciences to pay continued attention to the sociology of class if there is to be any coherent response to the weighty environmental challenges that face ‘our common future’. Indeed, I posit that there is a need to build a solid bridge between the sustainable development agenda and sociological class analysis and that doing so offers the possibility of subtle and nuanced approaches to global environmental problems. Essentially, for such a nuanced understanding of global environmental problems to be realised, I suggest that greater theoretical and empirical attention be turned to the ‘classed’ citizen-consumer.

Keywords: Class, consumption, distinction, symbolic, ethical consumption, sustainable development.

Introduction

This paper will advocate a return to class analysis for two reasons. Firstly, this is necessary to enrich an understanding of social inequality and difference. Secondly, such a return to class analysis is arguably vital to the effective management of social change in a society that is currently negotiating the mitigation of the effects of climate change.

In order to support this first reason for supporting the need for a return to class analysis, a case for its relevance will be made by drawing out the limitations of theories of reflexive individual agency in 'high modernity' (Beck 1992, Giddens 1990) when considering the deep seated structural constraints that face individuals in different social strata (Crompton 1998, Savage 2000) not only on an economic but on symbolic (Skeggs 1997, 2004) and moral (Sayer 2005) levels. The sociology of food will then be drawn upon in order to illustrate the use of such an example of 'ordinary' (food, water, electricity) as opposed to 'extraordinary' (conspicuous and luxurious items) consumption in drawing out instances of cultural value. Moreover, the theories of Bourdieu (1984, 1992, 2005) and their contemporary relevance to the study of class and food consumption in 'high modernity' will be explored. After establishing the significance of the relationship between social class and food for sociology, the impetus for the study of social class and ethical food consumption will be outlined in order to further call for the reclaiming of social class analysis for current sociology.

In support of the second reason for advocating a return to class in the social sciences, a case will be made for the relevance of class in understanding the potential problems faced in the transition towards sustainable food consumption. Preliminary findings from my empirical work will outline where alternative food networks seem to be empowering consumers to consume responsibly and in a manner that respects the balance between economy, ecology and society. However, such alternative networks can also be seen as having a disempowering effect on consumers, which essentially contribute to what can be termed the 'ceiling effect' of ethical consumption. The frame that upholds such a 'ceiling effect' can be seen as analogous to the hidden power of class relations, which arguably construct invisible barriers to the desirable end of becoming a 'moral', 'ethical' and therefore a 'worthy' and politically correct consumer. The aim of this research is to render such barriers visible in an effort to envisage a more equitable manner of producing and consuming food in a way that achieves a balance between the three pillars of sustainable development through *equitable* means.

The empirical aspect of the thesis from which this paper is drawn involved a two-year participant observation of two initiatives of alternative food consumption in South Wales. One is a Farmer's Market that sells produce directly from producer to consumer, and the other a Community Food Co-operative that sells bags of fresh fruit and vegetables at wholesale price (£2.50 per bag of mixed produce). Both sites are based in a community that scores highly on the 'Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation' and are involved in 'Communities First' initiatives. This paper has been informed by data collected over a two year period of participant observation and twenty semi-structured interviews. However, the focus of this paper is to highlight the theoretical aspect of the project, and to assert the case for a reinstatement of class analysis, particularly in light of contemporary environmental problems and their social pressures and consequences.

Class *Un-Consciousness*

The power of 'social class' as an explanatory tool for the social sciences has seen a demise in its command due to the corresponding rise in influence of the 'individuation thesis' (Giddens 1990, Beck 1992). Rather, the power of social class has been relegated as one amongst many contributing factors to the creation of the 'identity project' embarked upon by the individual social subject. Proponents of individuation do recognise class relations, but particularly focus on the economic aspect of structural inequality. However, do objective (structural) relations of inequality that restrict the access of some to structures of privilege not then have a lasting effect upon the subjective identity project at stake? Does such affect of the subjective identity project feed back into affecting one's view of objective class? Can objective class relations then be affected by subjective forces of class positioning that in turn reinforce such relations, and indeed render them subjective, as the subjective forces of the identity project come to affect how one feels about themselves in relation to others as socially and economically advantaged engage with one type of distinctive and superior brand of identity project, whilst the less advantaged have less possibilities open to them for such identity 'play' to take place. Therefore, are the factors contributing to a restricted access to structures of privilege and advantage not governed by more than *economic* structural inequality? Therefore, must we reinstate a study of class consciousness alongside the study of structural/economic class relations? I will argue that class is has greater explanatory power than is afforded by the individuation thesis alone, for a powerful class consciousness is arguably superseded by a just

as powerful class *un*-consciousness. Such class *un*-consciousness refers to the growing power of class that is fed by the very denial of the importance of class in determining how one is treated, and indeed how one feels about themselves and their role and position within the social world. Such denial therefore allows the harmful relations of class to intensify under the cloak of individualism, as those with little cultural, economic and social power find themselves looking inwards to attribute blame for their life circumstances, and for the hardships associated with living in conditions of poverty and social exclusion. Blame for such hardships are arguably then directed inwards at themselves or sideways to their family and peer groups rather than upwards to those in possession of the necessary cultural, social and economic power to ensure the restoration of their position of privilege, generation by generation. The upholding of positions of privilege are arguably achieved through techniques of distinction that separate themselves from the underprivileged and working class ‘other’ through moral and material social exclusion realised through a denial of the very system of class coupled with the deliverance of symbolic violence onto the working class body. Such a focus on ‘moral degradation’ as a means of achieving ‘symbolic violence’ (Skeggs 1997, 2004) will be central to the uncovering of class relations as visible through the reading of the signs placed on the working class body, that serve to preserve the position of the privileged, and allow for the working class body to remain immobile and powerless to resist the moral frameworks imposed by the middle classes. The imposition of moral codes and frameworks will be theorised by reference to the classed relations of food consumption, and indeed, how such relations are complicated further by pressures experienced by consumers to take part in a brand of *ethical* food consumption, afforded by an open public and political concern over climate change and food provenance.

The Symbols of Violence

“Class formation is dynamic, produced through conflict and fought out at the level of the symbolic” (Skeggs 2004:5)

Cultural artefacts, or moreover, the distinctive values that cultural artefacts come to represent within specific contexts have been noted for their uses in facilitating social mobility (Bourdieu 1984, Portes 1998, Putnam 2000). The term ‘social mobility’ here refers to the trend for movement both up and down the social scale by the acquisition of social, cultural, symbolic and economic capital (Bourdieu 1984) afforded by prestigious social networks and

ties. Skeggs (1997) explores the restrictions on social mobility experienced by white working class women in order to model this notion of cultural appropriation of sign value for the purpose of social mobility and fixity. This ethnographic study illustrates the symbolic position of white working class women as socially immobile, for they have come to wear the signs of moral degeneracy. The inscription of a value of moral degeneracy is made up of the significations of a young single mother, the spendthrift and the overweight with a tendency towards impulsiveness and instant gratification. Such bodies, according to Skeggs (1997, 2004) lack the cultural power to shrug off the limits of the symbolic violence imposed by the culturally dominant group and to manage how they are seen, and to wear the signs of their own choosing. Rather, these women were seen as subjected to the limits placed upon them by those with the power to do so. Working class women were lacking in symbolic capital, they had little prestige and social honour within the wider social field and were therefore subjected to the symbolic violence of those with the necessary capital to do so. Here I speak of symbols that maintain the position of power occupied by the middle and upper classes to inscribe values of moral degeneracy that disable means of achieving any kind of cultural respectability, to gain approval across the wider social field (Bourdieu 1984). Here, the reference to social groups is linked to the Marxian conception of 'class'. Such a conception involves the understanding of the bourgeoisie holding power over the classes that depend upon them for the work that provides the means of their subsistence. Such a relation is an inter-dependent relation, with the owners of the means of production needing a force for that very production. However, the means by which worker, the proletariat or the working classes are kept in this position of reliance (in order to earn an income) is arguably achieved through symbolic as well as economic dominance. For example, those of greater economic and symbolic power maintain their own positions by making those who underpin such a position feel that this is where they belong, and that there is no alternative. Such stasis in the nineteenth century was arguably achieved through a proliferation of the protestant ethic (Weber 1905, 2001) and the controlling hand of religion as a form of illusory happiness (Marx 1843, 1977). Class struggle was stifled by the belief that there was no alternative; one's position within the social order was predetermined and unchangeable. Such a belief in the natural social order can be seen to be maintained in the contemporary social world through a denial of the conditions under which to gain respect from the wider social field.

Within a contemporary context, the working classes are seen to be deprived of the means of earning respectability outside their own circles of 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1984). The white

working class women of Skeggs' (1997, 2004) ethnography experienced a daily struggle for value that was dealt with through maintaining a balance between the symbolic systems of ascribed degeneracy, and their self-generated alternative system of value that attributes reverence and moral standing to themselves. A Bourdieuan conception of the social field will illustrate here the symbolic class struggle that Skeggs observes in her ethnographic study, and indeed provides the theoretical underpinning for the findings of the research presented in this paper. The means of relegating another social group as inferior through the appropriation of symbolic capital will be at the forefront of this discussion regarding the powerlessness of social groups when subjected to the ascribed symbolic inscriptions of another, who operate within a different habitus, with different access to economic (money), cultural (legitimate knowledge) social (valuable networks) and symbolic capital (prestige and social honour).

The social field, according to Bourdieu is a network of objective relations between individuals and institutions. It comprises networks of relations that interact in a struggle to gain power, or 'capital' that comprise the resources at stake in the social field. Therefore, the field is an arena in which battles are fought over prestige, social class, the distinctiveness of ones intellect, and indeed struggles over cultural artefacts and goods that make up one particular lifestyle over another. More pressing than the recognition of the field as a site of power struggle, is the task of understanding how power is attained. Thus, in order to attain a status of greater levels of prestige across the wider social field then the individual social subject or institution must do so through the acquisition of capital by asserting their *distinctiveness* over another. Therefore, the social field becomes a battle ground in the struggle for legitimate power. However, one group has distinctly less 'capital' to draw upon in order to have a reasonable chance at winning a fair share of the legitimate resources at stake, for the high levels of capital possessed by the already socially, culturally, symbolically and economically advantaged, place them on a platform where upon such resources are within easier reaching distance than for those without. Essentially, the legitimate resources at stake in the social field are limited, and the already more powerful have greater access to acquiring even more. The field therefore serves as the location for class struggle over legitimate power. This domination, according to Bourdieu is achieved through the acquisition of social, economic, cultural and symbolic capital.

How, then, do practices of food consumption come to inflect or represent the relations of struggle in the social field for prestige and honour through the acquisition of symbolic

capital? Food has a extensive reputation for its use as an object to convey distinction (Veblen 1899, 2003) for the consumption of food has long been seen as analogous to the social system (Douglas 1972) as food comes to provide a lens through which to make visible the categories of culture (Douglas and Isherwood 1979). This view therefore supports the notion that the class relations of society can be understood through the study of food, and that empirical observation of how different social groups operating within different habitus across the wider social field relate to and consume food, can then aid an understanding of the signs that represent class struggle for symbolic legitimacy in the social field.

The employment of food as both cultural artefact and resource is a phenomenon documented by Jordan (2007). Here, the heirloom tomato is an object imbued with social meanings, and more interestingly, is subject to shifting meanings as it becomes desirable to consumers from differing (class) habitus as it became the subject of distinctive consumer practices through its consumption at farmers markets (Jordan 2007). This story is telling of the centrality of the *spaces of consumption* in understanding and investigating *distinction*, and indeed how the class relations of society can be decoded from a reading of the sign values embodied within a cultural artefact or resource such as the heirloom tomato.

The heirloom tomato derives from a seed that is guessed to be roughly 100 years old, and has been passed down through generations for the preservation of its breed and therefore rests in symbolic opposition to the conventionally grown tomato as derived from a hybrid seed. The heirloom tomato can be seen as a 'pure breed' tomato in need of genetic protection for the preservation of biological diversity. The shift in the consumption of the heirloom tomato took place when taken up at a farmer's market. Rather than remaining the occupation of a seed saver operating in their back garden, the heirloom tomato came to embody alternate meanings as it became obvious that the characteristics embodied by the heirloom tomato (of purity and in symbolic opposition to industrial methods of production) had become desirable to consumers willing to pay a premium price for a 'special tomato'. The heirloom tomato therefore came to wear the signs of distinction, not only despite their ugly appearance (green, soft and often split) but *because* of the values that such a tomato came to signify. Producers selling at a farmer's market saw opportunity to capitalise upon changes in consumer buying that had shifted towards the consumption of ordinary produce with distinctive qualities. Such distinctive qualities are characterised by this tomato as consumers place symbolic meaning onto the object that is organic, aesthetically ugly tomato. The heirloom tomato is off-colour,

and often misshapen and soft, and therefore rests in opposition to the juicy, firm, red conventionally grown tomato.

A key question for Jordan (2007) therefore was “how did these tomatoes break out of a highly individualised realm into a much more collective area of consumption and meaning, widely available both as a natural and symbolic resource, figuring in acts of distinction?” (Jordan 2007:27). In Jordan’s case of the heirloom tomato, the shift in the meaning of the object is characterised by the *moral project of preserving biological diversity*. This is seen to produce new consumer experience of tradition as a form of cultural distinction. The heirloom tomato therefore represents the intersection of the *preservation of tradition* through a backlash against industrial farming and genetic engineering with the *aesthetics of distinction* through superior *taste* (experienced through the distinctive flavour and appearance of the heirloom tomato). This story encapsulates the a trend towards the bifurcation of the market for organic food (Guthman 2003) where one market produces lower cost and processed organic food for the quasi-mass market, whilst the other produces higher value produce for direct markets that appeal to meanings of political change, biodiversity and novelty. Jordan (2007) interestingly marks her surprise at the lack of invocation of the values of biodiversity in the case of the heirloom tomato in the USA, but rather, sees a concentration of the values of the pure pleasure of conspicuous consumption as an explicit symbol of an elite lifestyle. However, it is vital to note how the spaces occupied by heirloom tomatoes are dual, whereby in some they are scarce, expensive and laden with cultural meanings of distinction, and in alternative spaces such as the garden in high summer, where they are plentiful, almost free and are the focus of the preservation of biological diversity.

A key question for this paper is, to what extent is the continued relevance of social class observable in relation to ethical food consumption, particularly due to the apparently proliferated middle class utilisation of ethical food as a symbolic resource to convey distinction from the working classes through discourses of ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’? A scan through a week of media will reveal discourses of ‘ethics’ that can be read within stories related to themes of the ‘environment’, ‘social justice’ and ‘personal health’ often found in popular media texts such as newspaper lifestyle features, news features regarding personal health and cooking programmes. Therefore, to what extent are such discourses of ethics conveyed by consumers who engage with alternative food practices? For the purpose of this research, it becomes necessary to ask; how does an ‘ethical practice’ such as consuming

organic food from a farmer's market become defined by those individuals or institutions with the necessary power or capital in the social field to be able to do so, manage to inscribe the signs of distinction onto such practices? What implications might the distinctiveness of ethical food practice have on the success of a sustainable development agenda? Further on in this paper I will argue that the class struggle for legitimacy in the social field, with the division of food into categories of ethical and subsequently by contrast a non-ethical with the ethical brand or category receiving status as a desirable cultural artefact consequently undermines the goals of the sustainable development agenda, and furthermore, renders visible the quagmire of class relations evidently at work in the social field. Firstly, however, a further exploration of the relationship between class, distinction and food will be outlined.

Class Reincarnated by the Cultural 'Omnivore'

Class positioning has long been seen as achieved via processes of distinction. However, the distinction thesis (Bourdieu 1984) has met criticism within the sociology of food when confronted by the 'omnivorousness thesis' (Peterson and Kern 1996). The distinction thesis champions the relevance of social class in the social field as groups struggle for distinction over others that utilise the resources of symbolic, economic, social and cultural 'capital'. Following the 'death of class' trend the 'omnivorousness thesis' presents an alternative conception to that of 'highbrow' taste that sees contemporary food consumption as expressive of a form of cultural 'omnivorousness' in taste. The cultural omnivore engages with food in a way that moves away from snobbish exclusion and towards expressions of cultural eclecticism. Such cultural eclecticism is exemplified by a broadening of the repertoire of high status foods. For example, the hamburger is now being reinterpreted as 'retro food' by many Michelin star chefs. Furthermore, ethnic foods are brought onto the inventory of cuisine offered in high status restaurants. This trend towards cultural eclecticism marks a "selective drawing from multiple cultural forms from across the cultural hierarchy" (Johnston and Baumann 2007:167). Such cultural omnivorousness has traditionally referred to the appropriation by the middle class of highbrow tastes such as in music and art (van Eijck 2001; Peterson and Kern 1996; Peterson and Simkus 1992; DiMaggio and Mukhtar 2004; Fisher and Preece 2003). However, recent shifts in the food market have rendered this ordinary consumption worthy of omnivorous attention. The omnivorousness thesis would see food reaching greater levels of democratic inclusion in the broadening of the higher echelons of food culture as previously excluded social groups find such higher echelons broadly more

accessible. However, *in practice* Johnston and Baumann (2007) do not only disagree with this thesis, but go further by asserting that the omnivorousness thesis *supports* the notion of distinction rather than resting in opposition to it, for the appearances of omnivorousness are precisely that: the disguising of relations of distinction in more discrete and apparently democratic fashion that continues to not only legitimate but to reproduce the relations of inequality. Omnivorousness therefore inwardly reinforces class relations, whilst outwardly presenting itself as democratic and socially inclusive. The class relations of food consumption are reinforced, or even *reincarnated* through a conception of omnivorousness in food practice.

Such omnivorousness observable through shifts in gourmet food writing, which has long provided a definitive guide of the desired repertoire of foods necessary for cultural legitimacy. This particular function observed by Johnston and Baumann (2007) arguably bears similarity to the kinds of functions assumed of newspaper lifestyle supplements and TV cooking programmes that promote ethical lifestyles and that provide guidance for effective engagement with the most current in ethical food practice, such as where to shop for ethical produce and indeed, what meals should be prepared once such produce is obtained. The example of gourmet food writing will be detailed in order to provide an example of how food as a cultural artefact became simultaneously imbued with the signs of both a denial of and reinforcement of class relations. In the case of gourmet food writing, the selectiveness of the foodstuffs listed excludes the widely stocked food items of the supermarkets. The selectiveness of the ingredients, rather than the explicit exclusion of the consumers on the grounds of price constitute subtler means of conferring status. Such subtle means are drawn out via two dominant frames found in gourmet food writing: *authenticism and exoticism*. Within the boundary of *authenticism*, smaller appeals to geographic specificity, simplicity, personal connection and historicism are made in order to activate the frame of omnivorousness. For example, references are made to the origins of certain foodstuffs brandishing the most local of olive oil, whilst simultaneously, the simplicity of certain dishes are valorised by drawing on examples of small scale production of ‘un-schooled’ cookery “from mama’s kitchen” (Johnston and Baumann 2007:181). Furthermore, personal connections are imported through championing the authenticity of the food created with the personal flair of the chef’s artistic creativity. The dish will consequently be seen as original and authentic as it is new and personal to *that* chef. A further strategy is identified in gourmet food writing as engendering a sense of authenticity. As a technique of validation, a sense of

historicism is found through the connection of foods to their historic or cultural tradition. This in turn requires a high degree of cultural capital, for highly specialised gastronomic knowledge is necessary (most commonly obtained from gourmet food writers) and a deep seated understanding of superiority of authentic foods over their industrially produced counterparts is compulsory.

Gourmet food writing, also legitimises omnivorous foods by drawing upon a frame of *exoticism* as well as authenticity. The framing of exoticism refers to foods that are exciting and unusual, and therefore correspond to tastes that exist separately from the mainstream taste bud. Unusualness and foreignness constitute part of the exotic frame, whilst excitement is bred through the conferring of distinction through write ups of foods that manage to break food norms. Such gourmet food writing is seen to draw the line between legitimate and illegitimate practices of food consumption, and therefore represents an exercise in distinction. However, the apparent democratisation of food as seen by proponents of the omnivorousness thesis (Peterson and Kern 1996) arguably serve to conceal these relations of distinctions, allowing the omnivores to both ‘have their cake and eat it’, the ‘having it’ represented by the consumption of superior goods, and the ‘eating it’ constituting the guise that the widening of the realm of superior foods represents a democratisation of high culture whilst remaining arbiters of omnivorous good taste. Food is therefore another arena in which individuals can engage in status displays. The omnivorousness thesis is therefore seen to support Bourdieu’s homology between culture and class through the practice of distinction, albeit in a way that further disguises hidden ideologies (as a hidden means of ensuring the domination of one group over another) of class habitus. Omnivorous food is therefore synonymous with distinctive food. Omnivorousness, as a distinct practice of food consumption meets the call for “a nuanced reading and analysis, rather than a refutation, of Bourdieu’s work on social class and food more specifically” (Johnston and Baumann 2007:196). Therefore, not only is there a need to reclaim class analysis for the sociological agenda, but to continue to empirically and theoretically understand the techniques of distinction at work and evident through the reading of cultural artefacts that are widely available and imbued with symbols that can be seen as highly indicative of the story of contemporary class practices.

The Three Pillars of Sustainable Development

The challenges posed by the degradation of the natural environment pose direct challenges to reconsider the ways that we as a society choose to generate human and non-human subsistence. One such arena in need of reconsideration is food provenance. The challenge of transforming food systems in light of a degraded natural environment from which to derive our subsistence is part of the discourse of sustainable development, which seeks to meet environmental challenges through a balance of economy, ecology and society (Baker 2006) without impeding the right for future generations, and the developing world to do likewise. Therefore, an interest in *sustainable consumption* as an offset of the wider paradigm of sustainable development encapsulates contemporary debate over the role of material goods in everyday life, from the material goods needed to provide nutrition and shelter, to the goods that create and maintain personal and cultural meaning through engagement with an ‘identity project’. A reconsideration of the role of material goods through a development of sustainable consumption proposes that “the insight that a certain amount of consumer behaviour is dedicated to an ultimately flawed pursuit of meaning opens up the tantalizing possibility for devising some other, more successful and less ecologically damaging strategy for creating and maintaining personal and cultural meaning” (Jackson 2006:20). Therefore, the environmental problematic as characterised by the exhaustion of resources derived from the natural world can be seen as of significant sociological interest, for through the paradigm of sustainable consumption, a reconsideration of the nature of consumption itself is seen as a means by which to move towards the goal of environmental sustainability. Such a reconsideration of the practices performed for the creation of personal and cultural meaning can be seen if we look back at the environmental movements of the 1960’s and 70’s, where rights based movements captured sentiments of alternate social and cultural meaning captured by anti-war and anti-consumerist activism and represented by the achievements of civil and animal rights groups.

However, it has been suggested that the radical spirit that was characteristic of environmental movements in past decades has been overtaken by a mode of ‘ecological modernisation’ whereby the radical environmentalist spirit has been seen to have become colonised by the mainstreaming of the environmental problematic into market based solutions that dampen the will for actual transformative environmental politics (Seyfang 2004). Such a colonisation is arguably rendered apparent by the individual market based response such as practices of

ethical consumption that can in some cases be seen to exclude those without the economic capital to engage with such consumption practices. Furthermore, the label *ethical* consumption itself does arguably pose a distinct moral challenge, for it could be seen to present a symbolic barrier to developing consumer participation, by its very distinctiveness as an elite. An ubiquity of messages left to consumer interpretation (Gabriel and Lang 2006) of the kind observable by the mainstreaming of ethics through the marketisation of sustainability, creates new problems of inclusion and exclusion that demands an analysis of the case for the reinstatement of class analysis in order to understand the implications that class struggle in the social field over the cultural artefact of ethical food can have on the success of a sustainable development agenda. Such a reinstatement of class analysis can arguably offer much to the normative agenda of sustainable development as set out by the Brundtland Report of 1985. For, if there is a recognition that some can more easily engage with practices of ethical consumption due to their greater access to cultural, economic, social and symbolic resources of ‘capital’ (Bourdieu 1984) then a more nuanced understanding of both class and practical means of achieving sustainability *for all* can ensue. Moreover, the status of food as a moralised terrain, and therefore as a cultural resource with a long standing reputation for the inflection of the relations of class, one would expect the take-up of ‘ethical’ and ‘environmental’ choices to reflect engagement with similar terrains of debate. However, the extracts below, taken from interviews with individuals who engage with ethical food practice illustrate an arguably endemic public attitude; that to make ethical choices in food consumption is simply a matter of rational choice based on education and political awareness. Therefore, a fundamental aim of this paper and subsequent thesis is to problematise the notion that environmental choices are rational and choice based. Rather, although consumer choices have throughout history been subject to constraints of cost, time, cultural preferences etc (Trentmann 2005) I would propose further challenges to the contemporary consumer. Such challenges involve those that create a terrain not only for class struggle, but the perpetuation of class relations of inequality through the inculcation of morality and ethics.

Environmental Justice

Sustainable development is *one* conception of environmental sustainability (Dobson 1998). Sustainable development as a normative agenda incorporates an anthropocentric vision (has a focus on human interest and human welfare) that sets out to preserve critical natural capital (the preservation of the natural resources that humans need to reproduce themselves into the

future). The anthropocentric nature of sustainable development as a theory of environmental sustainability should therefore take into consideration the question of social justice when dealing with environmental sustainability- for who is to bear the burden of environmental harm and who is to reap the benefits afforded by a sound environmental habitat? It is here that a discussion about class becomes vital in conceptualising a successful sustainable development agenda. Rather than simply conceptualising the distribution of environmental 'goods' or benefits (Miller 1976), a consideration of the distribution of environmental 'bads' (Dobson 1998) will provide a clear lens through which to understand the role of social class in determining one's access to either a degraded or plentiful natural environment.

There are however, limits to distributive justice, for there would need to be a common shared understanding of the meaning for determining a social or environmental 'good' (Waltzer 1994) from a 'bad'. Waltzer, coming from a communitarian perspective therefore problematises the notion that a common definition of an environmental good or bad can be accomplished on an international scale. In this sense, then, it would seem that there exists no *international* community that is able to address the challenges of distributive justice in terms of environmental sustainability at a global level. However, considering that there can be no one particular form of international distributive justice (Dobson 1998, 2003) this does not mean that there cannot be an international sentiment and act of *concern* about environmental sustainability that would affect at a global level. This perspective therefore hails the role of local communities in harnessing power for the distribution of environmental goods and bads within their own communities, and indeed act as arbiters in decision making about what constitutes an environmental good or bad for that particular community, whilst at the same time expressing concern for and considering the implications for environmental sustainability on an international level. For example, decisions about how to grow food in a manner that provides a balanced diet for the local human community, whilst preserving the conditions of the natural world to be able to continue to do so in the future requires local knowledge and local decision making in order to achieve an optimum result. For example, the growing of local food will differ from region to region, and community to community depending upon their needs and desires and the condition of the supporting environmental conditions therein.

Whilst this perspective is useful in highlighting the role of local communities in defining the terms of their particular brand of environmental sustainability, this does not easily fit into the agenda of sustainable development, for which international equity is a primary concern for

achieving its own particular brand of environmental sustainability. The relations between the developed North should be brought into a greater relation of equity with the developing South, and is therefore a concern of *international* distributive justice. How, then, can an agenda of sustainable development achieve a form of environmental sustainability whilst at the same time battling the seemingly incompatible notions of distributive justice that appear to be at loggerheads when considering the international *over the* local level and vice versa? Essentially, environmental sustainability and social justice are easily contestable concepts, for one can undermine the intentions of the other. Dobson (1998) gives the example of a rise in fuel costs to encourage a reduction in usage. Such a policy is sound on the grounds of environmental sustainability, and yet is profoundly unjust on social terms, for it places a heavier burden on the poorer members of the community of justice in question, than those of greater economic means. The potential for such competing outcomes when pursuing an agenda of environmental sustainability therefore makes likely the creation of policies that disguise the true implications of say, a strong eco-centric policy that does not take into account the environmental 'bads' that will then be placed as a burden upon the shoulders of those who were without the (economic) capital to resist such burdens.

Therefore, in order to envisage a form of environmental sustainability that both includes the sustainability of human processes, the irreversibility of natural processes once they have been used up by human and natural process as well as realising the value that nature has in and of itself, whilst at the same time incorporating strong levels of distributive justice, Dobson (1998) advocates the conflation of Wenz's (1988) concept of the concentric circle, whereby our moral obligations are seen to be stronger in relation to those who are closest to us, both physically and in terms of a faraway kinship relation of some kind. This in turn is seen to allow for the possibility of creating a culture of mutual 'helping' that reaches the common goals of that circle or network. Such a theory of concentric circles also stretches to an international level of obligations, particularly as those far away in physical space have become more readily recognised as part of our concentric circle. For example, the Fair Trade movement illustrates this quite well, for a moral obligation to pay a fair price for a packet of coffee or sugar is often evoked by advertisers in order to highlight the interconnectedness of the process of every day life between citizens in far reaching corners of the globe. Moral obligations and responsibility for the 'other' can be seen to have international reach.

However, such a focus on kinship networks creates the same kind of networks that might look somewhat similar to the habitus of Bourdieu (1984), Portes (1998), Putnam (2000)

whereby one circle is able to protect themselves from environmental bads and accumulate the privilege of environmental ‘goodness’ by drawing on the cultural and economic resources available to them within their circle in order to shift environmental bads onto those without the capital to be able to protect themselves from carrying an unequal share of the burden.

This discussion of justice in terms of the distribution of environmental ‘goods’ and ‘bads’ resonates strongly with stories told in relation to, say the realities of living in a degraded environment (such as the effects of toxic pollution) due to economic disadvantage. However, environmental ‘goods’ and ‘bads’ intersect in everyday life through practices of consumption, and more specifically, ethical food consumption. I will therefore suggest that not only are there actual goods being bought by the wealthier members of a community, but that such buying of environmental ‘goods’ provides a further arena for status display and acquisition of greater levels of symbolic capital. Jackson (2006) has demonstrated that material goods play a great role in conveying messages about status and creativity, rather than primarily serving material needs. Ethical consumption is therefore similarly implicated as a form of consumption arbitrated by the struggles for social distinction (Bourdieu 1984) in which one group of consumers ensures their cultural mobility and the fixity of the other through the mobilisation of resources of ‘capital’ (economic, symbolic, cultural and social) that ensure their access to the valued practice (i.e. ethical consumption). Who then, decides upon the culturally acceptable mode of environmental behaviour in terms of, say, food consumption? Skeggs (1997, 2004) has argued that it is the economic elites who have such power of inscription in a symbolic economy. The implications of this arguably render ethical consumption as a distinctive activity, which allows those with the cultural power or capital to inscribe values of immorality onto consumers excluded structurally from reaching the goal of sustainability through ethical consumption by the very practice of ethical consumption itself. It can also be argued that the very term ‘*ethical* consumption’ does further damage to warrant scepticism of *any* other sustainable practices for it potentially imbues those very practices with the same function of exclusion achieved by an association with the pretentious practice of ethical food consumption through the signs or symbols associated with that practice. The status quo arguably does little for empowering working class communities who are without the power to resist the dominant discourses and symbolic violence of the economic and cultural elite. Rather, they are forced into feeling a pressure to consume in ways that are beyond their economic power and exist outside the cultural frame of reference, or do not operate within the sign system of their habitus, but belong to that of the superior group. This

does little for empowerment to devise their own brand of environmental sustainability, and arguably fuels a resistance that may have harmful effects through the creation of an attitude of ‘anti-pretentiousness’ (Skeggs 1997, 2004). This will be developed within the empirical section of this paper.

Empirical Work

The objective of this research is to understand engagement with ethical consumption as mediated through social class. This research objective will be focused on gaining an understanding of how initiatives such as farmer’s markets that are engaged with ethical food consumption come to represent sites for the distillation of different ‘capital’ resources (symbolic, economic, cultural and social) as inspired by the moralising discourses of the wider social field. Such moralising discourses include the pressures conveyed in lifestyle magazines, cooking programmes and indeed communicated by peers who engage with alternate food practices.

A core assumption of the thesis from which this paper is drawn is that how people engage with alternative food networks is not only people reflecting their objective class position, but also their subjective class position in which the consumer either consciously intends to **reinforce** values common to their class, or to consciously **aspire** to identify with the values common to the class above them. Such objectives and assumption are summed up by three key questions that have guided the empirical work.

- 1) To what extent does class habitus become embroiled in consumer understanding of their relationship with food ethics?
- 2) Do conceptions of food and ethics vary between consumers from different socio-economic backgrounds?
- 3) Are particular kinds of engagement with ethical consumption representative of class?

Farmer’s Market Data

Semi structured interviews were conducted with ten customers of a farmer’s market in South Wales. These participants were recruited via a questionnaire administered at the research site at a previous date. The following categories of ‘malaise/addiction’ and ‘educating the other’ are emic categories of analysis that emerged from the interview data. Each of these terms will

be illustrated using excerpts and analysis of this data in order to illustrate how these interviews point towards a form of 'performativity'. This category of performativity is used as an etic category of analysis that will refer to the performative nature of the practices of the respondents that characterise a 'performance' of ethical practices rather than constituting substantive action of genuine transformative potential.

Performative versus Substantive Action

Shopping at the farmers market can be seen to represent a small contribution to challenging dominant trends in food production and consumption. This is particularly evident from the amounts purchased by the average consumer. Through observation of consumer purchases at the farmer's market, shoppers appear to be purchasing ingredients that cover one meal i.e. the traditional Sunday 'roast' (a dinner of roasted meat and a selection of vegetables covered in 'gravy') and appear not to be purchasing enough food to last one whole week. There are assumptions being made here about how much food would be necessary to last one week, however, shopping with the customers who I then later interviewed come to reveal that indeed, the purchases made on these regular visits on a Sunday morning/afternoon tend to be focused around 'treat' items rather than a practical 'full shop' as the market either does not offer the full range of items necessary (you cannot buy milk or toilet paper at the farmer's market) or it would simply be too expensive to buy 'everything'. Rather, purchases have tended to be 'treat' items such as novelty cheeses, bread or desserts from the French baker, intended as weekend luxury. Therefore, how much of shopping at a farmer's market constitutes genuine and effective political action? As expressed by the respondent represented by Extract 1 below, the farmer's market appears to him to act as a stage upon which politically minded people can come to perform an environmental consciousness that will alleviate them from further guilt and responsibility until the following week, when they will return to make further piecemeal political gestures.

Extract 1

O: Yeah there's a lot of erm I see people that speak Welsh, Welsh is my first language and there are quite a few Welsh language speakers there, middle class Welsh speakers erm so I'm always bumping into someone I know there and also other people from, it's not all middle class... not all, people I know from, I wouldn't classify it as necessarily a middle class neither, but but I don't know it just feels stereotypical it's like people make an effort to go on their bikes there, and I don't know many of those people go everywhere on their bikes or whether they just *feel* like you know you *feel* like '*oh you should*' and you take your *bags*, plastic bags there and your recycled bags and make a bit of an effort there, and I don't know maybe how if people carry that on in everyday of their life. Not that it's, not that it's criticising it, it just feels a bit like erm you know it's a bit it feels a bit artificial I suppose, but maybe I'm just looking

at myself, and everyone else lives their lives like that all the time. Well I take my car down there anyway, so (laughter).

Here, Oliver stumbles over referring to the customers of the market as middle class, and settles upon describing instead a set of stereotypical set of behaviours common to that ‘type of person’. The act of taking re-usable plastic bags, cycling down and ‘generally making a bit of an effort’ is seen to encapsulate the behaviour of farmer’s market customers. Oliver then wonders how much of this behaviour is carried on throughout the week. This begs the question of whether or not the customers in question live the ‘good life’ at all times. Alternatively, does visiting a farmer’s market regularly provide a stage upon which to perform all of the ‘correct’, socially approved and thus legitimate activities, and *to be seen* doing so. The enacting of such a performance begs the question of whether or not this creates a sentiment that allows for the switching off of the environmental and social conscience when behind he closed doors of one’s own home, where the outwardly political consumer can turn on the TV, the washing machine, and to run a nice hot bath? This conception of the farmer’s market as a stage for performative rather than substantive action is not intended to relegate the intentions of the market organisers and the producers as insufficient. For the paying of a fair price for one’s produce is undoubtedly a worthwhile exercise in social justice. However, the potential for uptake of this model of food consumption across the population of a highly morally and symbolically as well as economically classed population, I argue, has limited potential for a genuinely transformative food system that characterises the successful implementation of a sustainable development agenda.

I will now turn to a sub-category of analysis that has emerged from the data, and arguably illustrates the moralising position held towards those who do not engage in this particular brand of ‘ethical’ consumption.

Malaise/Addiction

The following narrative is extracted from an interview conducted with a customer of the farmer’s market selected for this study. Here, Robert speaks of his abhorrence of supermarkets, and the financial advantages of staying away from them.

Extract 2.

I’ve given up going to supermarkets I’m a reformed supermarket addict...

J: When did you give up?

R: About a year ago, and it was it was actually quite difficult to give up, it is an addiction, it's eternal summer there, music's playing, everything's bright, wonderful, and you always buy more than you intended to so you have a lovely big trolley-full of food, but you know that you've saved money because it says so, even though you've spent more than you meant to when you went in. When we were quite poor, just only the one wage coming in, and I remember putting my hand out in a supermarket and *having to stop* and *sometimes* even having to put things back on the shelves because I couldn't afford it so I do understand what it's like having no money in your pocket and people wanting cheap food erm but I tend to feel there's a delusion going on...if you've got twenty pounds, you'll spend twenty *one* pounds in the supermarket but if you've only got twenty pounds in your pocket you'll spend twenty pounds *only* when you go down the market, because it's cash in hand.

A commonly held opinion is that farmer's markets and shopping locally from a variety of retailers works out as more expensive than shopping at a supermarket, where bargains are often to be had all under one roof. This is not a view shared by Robert. Shopping at farmer's market or in local shops then, according to Robert amounts to not only a saviour of money spent but to the saving of one's integrity. For, as conveyed later on in the interview, shopping at a farmer's market is seen to stop the shopper from buying on credit, and therefore getting in to debt. Robert arguably takes for granted that one has cash to spend and does not need to rely on credit. Although Robert has claimed to have gone with thirty pounds, and come away with change, a small amount of produce was purchased during his visit to the farmer's market on the day that I shopped with and interviewed the participant. It is clear from the interview that Robert shops at a number of other local shops, however such a style of shopping has been renowned for costing more money, not less. As will be demonstrated through analysis of narratives of the Community Food Co-op customers, supermarket shopping is not the consequence of a deluded state of consciousness, consumers who look for cheap food are savvy about how much they have to spend on food, are aware of the political issues at stake and are determined to get the most for their money. In these cases, shopping at a farmer's market is often out of the question.

Following on from the conception of eating cheap food as a 'malaise' or 'delusion', the following extract demonstrates a discourse of wanting to educate the 'other'. In this interview, Caroline identifies the working class residents of her community as the 'other' and as the 'un-educated' consumer.

Educating the 'Other'

Spreading the gospel of 'good food' to the uneducated 'other' has remained a common theme throughout interviews with the customers of the farmer's market. However, for the sake of

this paper I will concentrate on one interview in particular. The following extract shows Caroline unravelling her thoughts on class and alternative consumption. Caroline is reflecting on the on the recent decision to start up a farmer's market inside a local entertainment complex when she returns to a narrative on the relationship between class and ethical or environmental consumption habits. Caroline is wondering about how successful this market will be, considering that markets are for a small group of 'people with particular interests' and therefore sees the widening of access to farmer's markets as potentially problematic, for reasons illustrated by Extracts 3 and 4 below.

Extract 3.

C: I think there's a huge divide really between people who erm people who go in for all the organic stuff and free range meat and farmer's markets and cook food and ...have a commitment to ethics and politics and how it's produced and so on. People who have just been manipulated into eating cheap food and not cook and you know it's partly a class thing but not only a class thing, it's more complicated than that probably erm so I suppose at the moment there's quite a sort of criticism of in a way people like me who say oh well we must have our organic vegetables and all the rest of it but how is that going to work in a more democratic way, how's it going to be possible to...because the focus the targeting of all this is towards people like people like that and you can only go so far with that, you've got to try and change more generally.

When asking Caroline to tell me more about what she means by those who have 'been manipulated into eating cheap food' and whether or not could she identify such people within her community, the following extract conveys her response.

Extract 4.

C: erm you know the sort of the sort of people I was talking to you about ...quite working class parents I know who took their children to school with my kids, they've got a hugely different attitude to life than my friends and I have. Erm and it's not just about money, I mean a lot of them are earning more money than I am, probably but they spend their money in different ways, because that's how that kind of culture is very different erm and so it's not just an economic thing it's a kind of cultural thing as well, I think... in terms of being very uncritical about that sort of things I'm criticising in terms of the consumerist culture, cheap food, not worrying about where the stuff comes from how far it's come or how it's produced and just saying well something's cheap and that's great and bigger cars and going on foreign holidays and thinking that's you know, taking the attitude that that's the good life.

Here, more assumptions are made by Caroline about what constitutes the 'good life' and indeed, such assumptions are made by drawing on class distinctions. Caroline, here, makes explicit the boundaries and categories of class relations as understood from her perspective. The 'good life' from a middle class perspective is seen as being involved, interested and critical of mainstream food culture, whereas from a working class perspective the 'good life' is seen as constituted by an entirely reverse attitude; the vulgar conspicuous consumption of

foreign holidays and expensive cars afforded by the consumption of cheap food. The working classes are seen to prefer to have cheap food in order to be able to engage in ostentatious displays of consumption, where their efforts at status display are most visible. Such observations made by Caroline are therefore not uncritical of the role that farmer's markets can play in paving the way towards genuinely alternative modes of consumption that are more respectful of the fine balance between economy, ecology and society. However, the solution, according to Caroline is education, education, education. The working class 'other' must therefore be re-educated into the culture of the middle classes, away from the malaise of ostentatious over-consumption of the 'wrong type of goods'. Working class people are seen as needing to inculcate entirely different habits that would require extensive cultural reprogramming in order to effectively perform an environmental consciousness. Such an opinion encapsulates the very sort of moralising that seems to trigger an 'anti-pretentious' or sceptical response from customers at the local Community Food Co-operative.

Community Food Co-operative Data

The following categories of 'tradition', 'scepticism and mistrust', 'confusion', 'not for us' and the 'blase' are emic categories of analysis that emerged from the interview data. Each of these terms will be developed using excerpts and analysis of this data in order to show how the interviews support the hypothesis of 'anti-pretentiousness' (Vicinus 1974, Skeggs 2004) as a form of resistance to the moralising discourses of other groups. The label 'Anti-pretentiousness' is used as an etic category used as a lens through which to interpret the interview data.

Anti-pretentiousness

The critique of pretension acts as a blockade to the moral judgements of others, achieved through a constant stream of critique designed to attack pretensions that are in this case, common to middle class symbiosis. Such blocking of moral judgement via a sustained critique through the 'piss take' (Willis 2002) involves mocking those who appear to be acting 'above their station'. Vicinus (1974) documents the origin of such anti-pretentiousness in the music halls of the early 1900's where the working classes gathered to laugh at and mock the representations of middle class restraint and snobbery that were performed on stage. A similar phenomenon is documented by Skeggs (2004) via an analysis of the critiques made in the media of pop stars who are unsuccessful in hiding their middle class credentials. Hiding such middle class credentials is argued to be essential in order to achieve success in the music

business, and those who attempt to hide middle class privilege are subject to the anti-pretentious ‘piss-take’. Having ideas ‘above your station’ is an offence deserving of anti-pretentious attack. The idea of working class defence against middle class pretensions and moral judgement has been evident throughout the fieldwork at the Community Food Co-operative and has arguably shone through the interview data. The ways in which anti-pretentious critique of middle class judgement will be demonstrated in the extracts below, which each convey such critique of pretension through a devaluation of practices which they cannot take part in. Such anti-pretension does however appear in different ways, and thus deserve analytical categories of their own.

Tradition and Change

Wayne and Valerie are brother and sister and live in the local area. They attend the community food co-op every week and share the fruit or vegetables amongst the family. Valerie will take out what she and her husband would like to eat, and the rest is given to her son and brother, who live close by in the family home that Wayne and Valerie grew up in. The food prepared at home by Valerie and her husband follows a set routine, starting with meat at the beginning of the week, an omelette during the week, and ending with fish on a Friday and a traditional roast or ‘hot’ dinner on a Sunday. These meals are reminiscent of ‘what Mum used to make’. However, Valerie recognises the changing nature of home cooking, since mothers have had to go to work to support their families.

Extract 5.

V: as I say mothers were at home so they did home cooking...but I mean you know you don't hear about people doing things like that do you, as I say when we were younger, Monday was washing day, Friday was fish Sunday was making tarts and things for the week, we had the old fashioned larder with a cold shelf and they went in there and they lasted as long as we didn't eat 'em and Mum used to do erm roll out pastry jam on the pastry and coconut and then roll it up 'til you had a sausage and then cut it through and cook them like that with a little extra coconut, like roly poly but she used to just make them as small thing about that big (gestures to a large 50p size with her hands) so roll them that way and cut them so you could stand them up like that, but they had the time to do that because they weren't in work as well whereas most Mum's these days have to work as well you know, Mum's go to Iceland¹.

Here, Valerie reflects on the changes observed since she was a child, helping her mother make tarts on the designated ‘baking day’. Now that Mum's *have* to work, Mum's also *have* to go to Iceland in order to fulfil expectations within both the labour market and as within the

¹ Iceland is a UK supermarket chain that sells predominantly pre-packaged frozen ready meals at a cheap price as compared to other supermarket chains.

home. This extract is supported further by an interview conducted with two sisters Victoria and Shelley.

During their interview, Victoria and Shelley reflect upon the complex and difficult role of the working class mother or homemaker today. Victoria and Shelley live next door to each other and have lived in the local area all their lives. They feel that they live at the heart of a real ‘community’ where people look after each other, and where food, parties and sad times are shared. Changes in tradition are noted, and again, mount a defence for the working class mother today.

Extract 6

V: I mean they talk about in Farm Foods², there’s a lot of these ready made foods you know and they say you shouldn’t do it, but if people have got children and they haven’t got much money they’ve got to go to places like that, because sometimes it’s cheaper than going out and buying because I mean the way food has gone up well it can be cheaper to go and buy ready made food for your kids

S: Yeah it is, I mean I, it’s not perhaps as healthy is it really, but I mean people have got to do it haven’t they

V: It’s like years ago I mean you used to get filled up on bread and potatoes and yet they tell you today that’s not healthy, you know eating the bread and so much potatoes, but that’s the only way you couldn’t fill up years ago.

Here, Victoria and Shelley agree with dominant discourse that ready meals are not healthy, but defend the mother who feeds her children ready meals by intimating that sometimes *there is no choice*. This question of choice is *vital* to the argument here about the relevance of class to ethical consumption, for choice is heralded as the solution to switching to more environmentally sustainable food production and consumption practices. However, I argue, with the support of Extracts 5 and 6 that not everyone has the same economic and symbolic access to the power required to make these choices. Rather, health and wellbeing is linked here with ‘well-fed-ness’; thus feeding ones children *enough* food rather than what has been deemed the *right* food.

Scepticism/Mistrust/Confusion

A further branch through which a critique of pretension appears is through discourses of mistrust, scepticism and confusion. Victoria and Shelley discuss this in relation to the debate over the superiority of organic vegetables. Throughout several interviews with different

² Farm Foods is a UK supermarket chain that sells frozen food at a relatively cheap price as compared to other supermarket chains.

respondents, organic food is heralded as ‘not for us’ - ‘us’ being those on a lower income, and the working classes who are economically and symbolically excluded from the practice of ‘distinctive’ ethical food consumption such as the consumption of ‘organics’. Victoria tells the story of their grandmother, who smoked twenty cigarettes a day, ate everything including cheese, butter and the fat from the meat, and still lived to the age of ninety seven. This, they assert, is the case for moderation in diet, rather than a fanaticism about ‘organics’ and ‘super-foods’.

Extract 7

S: This is what we do really isn't it- everything in moderation and I think you're okay

V: and it's the same with erm tablets from the doctor, I don't take tablets! If I can get away with a home made remedy, you don't know what you're taking! That's the worrying thing today inn'e because you can be taking something for years and then they'll so this is causing this and this is causing that, and you think that's nice the doctor's been giving me this for so many years! You just don't know do you...what they're feeding you! And yes, with food, the way I look at it now...say you had a field of wheat there, now that's organic, and two fields away it's not, say bees go on there and fly on there and there's sort of, that pollen goes onto some of that is that still organic or isn't it!

S: Makes you wonder doesn't it

V: This is the thing that worries me

The scepticism expressed in this extract is linked to the mistrust of public advice on what counts as good for one's health. Victoria and Shelley are referring to advice and guidelines disseminated ‘on the news’ as both unclear and trustworthy. Earlier on in the interview, Victoria questions the nature of the research that substantiates claims to the superiority of organic food for one's health. In the following extract, Victoria and Shelley go further in order to illustrate that they see ‘organics’ as a great swindle that frightens consumers into spending more money on the same conventionally produced produce but with an organic label.

Extract 8

S: I think some of the things they put on these veg can't be very good can it, some of it.

V: The fertilisers...no it's not and yet how can you tell I mean there's been stories of them selling organic carrots which *are not organic carrots* they just labelled them so there are people cheating you know. Because to be honest I don't know what the difference is

S: No

V: Is there a difference? I mean if there were organic potatoes on offer in Tesco's I'd buy 'em what did we have the other day organic... spring onions?

S: Yes

V: I bought 'em simply because they were reduced

S: I don't know if there's any different taste did you think?

V: I didn't find a different *taste* and I mean how can you tell what it does to you, they can't tell you that can they! You know so I think, well what do you do!?

S: and it *is* dearer and you can't always do that, that's the thing can you?

V: Sometimes I think, I'm 78 what does it matter, you know. Well you don't know do you

S: It's true

Here, the two sisters recognise that vegetables grown with the aid of artificial fertilisers ‘can’t be very good’. However, having tried organic produce, they feel there was no difference in terms of taste, therefore the label that affords the organic status to these vegetables are possibly a ‘cheat’ where the label is used to imbue the vegetables with meanings of distinction, and of course, an accompanying distinctive price. Both Extracts 7 and 8 arguably contribute towards a critique of pretension. Here, the critique of pretension is developed through a conveyance of mistrust of both the science that supports the superiority of organic produce for one’s health, as well as the integrity and honesty of organic producers and retailers.

The data presented here from both the farmer’s market and community food co-operative’s customers serve to highlight the necessity for a class analysis of practices of ethical consumption. The narratives of Extracts 1-4 are chosen to emphasise that the farmer’s market offers little potential for inspiring substantive change in food systems, particularly across class boundaries. Rather, action at the farmer’s market can be seen as performative, and representative of a moral burgeoning of ethical responsibility, and a vehicle by which to assert one’s credentials, and earning the right to be able to moralise the consumption behaviour of the ‘other’ who is suffering from a malaise or a addiction to cheap food, or that need to be educated and rehabilitated into ‘the right way’ of consuming. Such assumptions are indirectly countered by the conversations represented by Extracts 5-8, where resistance to the moralising discourses of Extracts 1-4 can be seen through the insistence upon the very *lack of choice* possessed by working class consumers. Furthermore, this lack of choice is confounded by a scepticism and mistrust regarding the integrity of the practices of producing and retailing ‘alternative’ produce such as ‘organics’. Such scepticism can be seen as another form of resistance to dominant ethical food consumption practices, through anti-pretentiousness (as defined above) as a means of maintaining self-respect. I argue that the prevalence of discourses of performativity and anti-pretentiousness are essential to understanding the relations of class that work to potentially undermine a genuinely alternative food system.

Concluding Comments

The complexity of ethical consumption in a society driven by the ever-presence of structural and symbolic class inequality is drawn out by the admonishing label of a certain type of

ethical consumption as set against a sort that through a process of comparison is consequently deemed *unethical*. A study of social class as it is relevant in high modernity must therefore not ignore the highly nuanced realm of food consumption, especially considering the new pressures of ethical consumption. Such consumption can be seen as a pressure as it must be acknowledged that such a label that presumes *one* set of morals for *all* will exclude some whilst simultaneously brandishing the excluded as *immoral citizens*. Decisions about how to consume “cannot be reduced to simple calculations of outcomes or rules, but require a more careful consideration of the complexities of ordinary ethical conduct in everyday life” (Harrison et al 2005:16). The development of ethical consumption as an individualised response to a wider problem must therefore raise nuanced responses from those engaging with or distancing themselves from the practice of ethical consumption.

This concept of distancing oneself from a practice framed as ‘moral’ or ‘ethical; can be related to a discussion in which Skeggs (2004) characterises the term ‘anti-pretentiousness’. The employment of the term ‘anti-pretentiousness’ will arguably provide a new lens for understanding engagement with sustainable consumption from a classed perspective. Making moral judgements from one class perspective, about another has been observed in the music halls of the nineteenth century (Vicinus 1974) where the working classes provided a humorous critique of the uptight middle classes who were seen as continuously making moral judgements of them. Critique of the economically and morally superior class has long been expressed through the medium of humour often expressed as Skeggs (2004) labels ‘anti-pretentiousness’. Therefore, as the particular kind of food consumption that has been branded ‘ethical consumption’ grows³, Barnett et al in Harrison et al (2005) recommends that rather than offsetting ethical consumption against ‘non-ethical consumption’ it becomes necessary to realise the ethics that may be embedded in *all ordinary consumption practices*. It is therefore essential to recognise how the practice of ‘ethical consumption’ places *some* in a position from which they may become subject to denigration as immoral by those who have the capital resources to become moral through the practice of ethical consumption. On the other hand, the same excluded and ‘immoral’ group may become scathing of such a practice through their own practice of ‘anti-pretentiousness’ (Skeggs 2004) often expressed through scepticism. Furthermore, as described above in relation to Interview 1, due to the powerful

³ E.g. The sale of organic food increased by 1.7% in 2008 to over £2.1 billion despite global recession and a fall of 1.9% in GDP, an increase on unemployment by 1.3% and a general fall in retail sales of 1.8%. (Soil Association Organic Market Report 2009).

discourse of distinction and superiority drawn upon to sell organic and local produce, excludes the majority of those without the economic capital to take part in that particular type of environmental practice. However, the trouble with this works at a deeper level than that of economic exclusion, with arguably catastrophic effects for the future of alternative food systems. This lies with the power of 'anti-pretentiousness'. If, when confronted with a choice to engage in an alternative means of food consumption, inspires the dismissal of that practice on the basis of previous experience of moral condescension, such scepticism could bleed further, thus undermining any future success of genuinely alternative practices of food production and consumption that have not been laden with moral and symbolic superiority, which injures some consumers through subtler and more powerful means of symbolic violence (Skeggs, 2004) than that of economic exclusion.

How, then, do we reconcile the well meaning objectives of ethical consumption with the structural and symbolic inequality that essentially relegate ethical consumption an exclusionary practice that reinforce a moral power of one group over another? Arguably, a reinstatement of class analysis onto the fore sociological agenda is necessary in both understanding contemporary class identity as subjective class *un*-consciousness, and in initiating practicable means of realising the goals of sustainable development. As demonstrated by the data presented in this paper, a 'one size fits all' policy will arguably not suffice, particularly across a society characterised by social difference and inequality.

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