Ethics as Fetish:

Toward a Theory of Ethical Consumer Consciousness

David Perkins

A Thesis

In

The Department

of

Sociology and Anthropology

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Masters of Arts (Sociology) at

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

September 2013

**CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY**

**School of Graduate Studies**


This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By:           David Perkins

Entitled:      Ethics as Fetish: Toward a Theory of Ethical Consumer Consciousness

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Arts (Sociology)**

Complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with

respect to originality and quality.


Signed by the final Examining Committee:

Dr. Meir Amor _____ Chair

Dr. Amy Swiffen _____ Examiner

Dr. Marc Lafrance _____ Examiner

Dr. Katja Neves _____ Supervisor


Approved by     _____

                        Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director


_____ 2013                    _____

                        Dean of Faculty

**ABSTRACT**

**Ethics as Fetish: Toward a Theory of Ethical Consumer Consciousness**

**David Perkins**

This thesis analyses the relationship between ethical consumption and morality in a contemporary context of neoliberalism. Following Carrier (2012), ethical consumption is defined as an ambiguous mechanism through which social value and economic choice are brought together in order to affirm both. Tim Hortons' (2012) Coffee Partnership Program, an initiative that takes place under the company's "Making a True Difference" campaign, serves as a case study of the form that contemporary ethical consumption takes. Though theorists of risk society (Beck 1992, Giddens 1991) and governmentality (Rose 1999, Miller and Rose 1997) have argued that neoliberalism coincides with greater experiences of anxiety due to increased knowledge of risks and pressures of responsibilization, ethnographies of ethical consumers (such as Connolly and Prothero 2008, Adams and Raisborough's 2010) have indicated that ethical consumption tends to mitigate the anxieties associated with consuming by guaranteeing the sustainability of the commodity in question. I argue that by guaranteeing the extent to which a commodity is ethical, such consumption paradoxically lessens the extent to which individual consumers experience the psychic turmoil of social and political responsibility to others. I use the concept of "commodity fetishism" from Marx (1990 [1867]) nuanced with a contemporary psychoanalytic notion of fetishism (Edelman 2005 [2004], and Žižek 2006, 2008, 2008 [1989], 2012) to explain the phenomenon of this mitigation.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*For those who struggle*

*with disciplinarity.*

*I fought the Law*

*and the law won.*

# Table of Contents

# 1. Introduction

What follows is an attempt at thinking through the relationship of consumption to morality in a contemporary context of consumer culture characterized by the availability of so-called "ethical" commodities in a practice that has come to be known as "ethical consumption." It ties together Marx's (1990 [1867]) notion of commodity fetishism as the misapprehension of the source of an object's value inherent in the social relations constituting capitalism and more recent psychoanalytic conceptions of the psychic role of the "fetish" in constituting stable narratives (both of the self and of history) by Edelman (2005 [2004]), and Žižek (2006, 2008, 2008 [1989], 2012).

I argue that by guaranteeing the extent to which a commodity is ethical, ethical consumption paradoxically lessens the extent to which individual consumers experience the psychic turmoil of social and political responsibility to others. Here, the "other" may be local, far away, or even a different species, kingdom, or other even other more general environmental concerns (e.g., biodiversity loss, climate change, water conservation, ecological devastation, etc.) (Carrier 2010). In order to illustrate the extent to which ethical consumption constitutes the conditions of possibility for this ethical tension, I will perform a textual analysis of the Canadian coffee purveyor, doughnut shop, and quick service restaurant Tim Hortons' (2012) Coffee Partnership Program, part of their campaign to "Make a True Difference" in the lives of those with whom they interact. In so doing, I illustrate how the narratives of origin, partnership, sustainability, and ethics create the conditions of possibility for a potentially problematic discourse of moral self-understanding.

1

*1-1. Defining Ethical Consumption*

Carrier (2012) refers to ethical consumption as any activity that attempts to bridge the gap between social value and economic practice, insofar as these two spheres of communal human activity are ever distinguishable from one another. This characterization of ethical consumption leaves intact the ambiguity implied by ethics, and as Carrier notes, even a practice as contemptible as the Nazi boycott of Jewish-made commodities would qualify as a form of ethical consumption; it is a choice made about consumption (i.e., to not consume) by reference to a social value (i.e., anti-Semitism). It is precisely because of this essential ambiguity that I will mobilize this broad definition. The ambiguity of this formulation opens up the possibility that historical (including current) forms of consumption that seem "ethical" to the present may, upon reflection or retroactively, be revealed as problematic, unethical, immoral, or even reprehensible.

This distinction between social value and the economy was perhaps rendered most palpable by Weber (2007 [1978]) in his analysis of the differences between ideal typical formulations of classes and status groups; whereas status groups are established upon historically-based estimations of the social value of prestige and thus belong to the sphere of meaningful social action, class refers to an estimation of life chances based upon the distribution of goods within society and tends to be an infrequent basis for social action. Class becomes a description of empirically observable and measurable indicators, and is not necessarily meaningful to a social agent. In this typology, class is indifferent to social value, leading to Weber's (2007 [1978]) own interested ambivalence toward the "parvenu" or the "nouveau riche" in America: those people that have no historical precedent for the affluent life they enjoy, as they are not members of any

traditional status group and thus have no limits upon how they might enjoy that affluence. What is understood as contemporary ethical consumption, then, represents a renewed attempt at integrating social meaning within an economic system based on exchange. In particular, it refers to the attempt to make the assumed self-interest of individual consumption work for the social and/or global (or environmental and thereby social or global) whole.

Further still, Lewis and Potter (2011) delineate between ethical consumption and what has been called "political consumerism," under which acts such as activism, boycotts, and consumer organizations form the basis of action. Lewis and Potter maintain that such a distinction is truly only sustainable in abstract, ideal types, as it is quite easy to see how the tactics and strategies of political consumerism influence the consumption practices of individual members (e.g., individual activists, boycotters, and concerned consumers). Again, political consumerism coincides with the Weber's (2007 [1978]) formulation of the "party," a group of people joined together for the sole purpose of exercising social action oriented toward the achievement of some goal (i.e., power). This complicates Carrier's (2012) ambiguous definition of ethical consumption, and in particular his example of the Nazis' boycott; the Nazis' (a party) organized the boycott, but relied on individual members of the Volk (i.e., Germans) to comply (i.e., individualized responsibility). The distinction between party and status group here is instructive precisely because the choice to consume ethically tends to be formulated as an individual, autonomous choice. It is not the organization or orientation of an entire group (i.e., party) of concerned individual consumer/citizens around a particular cause or concern (Soper 206).

It is around these distinctions, however untenable in practice, that contemporary ethical consumption is organized. Though the definition of what, exactly, constitutes ethical consumption is quite open, the practice is focused around the economic act of shopping, buying, and consuming in certain ways that may be informed by attempts at reintegrating either social ends or political goals to the economic exchange implied by individuals' consumption. The restaurant franchise Tim Hortons' (2012) "Making a True Difference" campaign is one such attempt.

*1-2. The Tim Hortons "Difference"*

The following information about Tim Hortons has been assembled from its English-Canadian consumer website (www.timhortons.com/ca/en). Tim Hortons is a Canadian purveyor of coffee and doughnuts named after and founded in 1964 by famous Canadian hockey defenseman Tim Horton. Since its inception, it has become somewhat of a Canadian business champion, with more than 3 000 locations across Canada and over 600 locations in the Eastern United States, making it the largest quick service restaurant chain in Canada. It boasts that its Canadian operation is 95% franchise owned and operated, in order to lend credence to its claims of commitment to Canadian communities, citizens, and consumers alike.

In 2005, Tim Hortons launched its own foray into the ethical consumption landscape with its "Tim Hortons Coffee Partnership" program. In keeping with Carrier's (2010) definition of ethical consumption, the Coffee Partnership program is concerned with not only social, but also environmental issues. Tim Hortons indicates that there are three key "pillars" to its Coffee Partnership program, namely: Pillar 1) "Economic:

helping coffee farmers earn a better living by training them to be better farmers and run better businesses," Pillar 2) "Social: empowering youth and improving education of the children of coffee farmers so they have the opportunity for a better future," and Pillar 3) "Environmental: educating coffee farmers and helping them adopt more environmentally sound and sustainable farming practices" (Tim Hortons 2012).

Working together with the Hanns R. Neumann Stiftung (HRNS) Foundation, the Tri-National Comission of the Trifinio Plan (CTPT), and Junior Achievement (JA) in Guatemala, Tim Hortons touts that it has worked with over 3 400 farmers and influenced the lives of over 17 000 people in Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, and Honduras.

Something distinct (or different, even) about Tim Hortons' approach to their ethical consumption line of products is that the organization chose *not* to simply buy Fair Trade or Rainforest Alliance certified coffee (two established organizations that certify the social and environmental impacts of coffee production are within certain responsible and sustainable limits), opting instead to develop their own distinct criteria and brand in concert with the HRNS foundation, the CTPT, and JA, externally verified by Control Union Certifications (CUC), an independent third-party organization.

The fruit (or rather, the seed of the fruit) of this Coffee Partnership program has been Tim Hortons Partnership Blend Coffee. At $7.69 for 343 grams of fine ground coffee, the Partnership Blend is only $0.70 more expensive than Tim Hortons' classic and instantly recognizable 343 gram can of fine ground coffee. Furthermore, of that $7.69, Tim Hortons advertises that $1.00 from every purchase of Partnership Blend Coffee goes to support the ongoing Coffee Partnership Program. Apart from creating its own criteria and guidelines for its Coffee Partnership program, it is this mediated appearance of the

direct exchange of consumption dollars to production benefits that sets Tim Hortons apart from some of the more abstract guarantees of some of the better-known fair trade organizations mentioned above.

In what follows, I will illustrate how the Tim Hortons Coffee Partnership program "fetishizes" its own historical context, its own business practices, and in fact this very campaign according to Marx's (1990 [1867]) theory of "commodity fetishism," in an effort to appeal to consumers' moral sensibilities. Nuancing this theory of commodity fetishism with psychoanalytic notions of fetishism (Edelman (2005 [2004]), and Žižek 2006, 2008, 2008 [1989], 2012), I contend that the monetary implication of the consumer purchasing the Partnership Blend Coffee operates in such a way as to make the consumer feel as if he or she is a "partner" in the program. The $1.00 from every purchase that funds the Coffee Partnership program becomes a kind of individual charity in and through the act of consumption, guaranteeing that good will come from the individual choice to consume better. I am here advancing a line of inquiry developed by Žižek ("RSA" 2009) in a discussion of Tom's Shoes "One for One program (wherein for every pair of shoes you buy, Tom's Shoes will give one pair to a child living in poverty), that "in the very consumerist act you buy your redemption from being a consumerist [sic]"; charity and vindication become internal to the cultural logic of capitalism.

## 2. Literature Review

In order to link the narrative of ethical consumption as it appears in the Tim Hortons "Make A True Difference" campaign to the moral self-identity of the consumer subject, it is necessary for me to being with a discussion of how "ethical consumption" is currently conceived in relation to current literature. More specifically, I will refer to two conceptual and theoretical literatures and the recent existing literature on ethical consumption in the context of neoliberalism. The first (2-1) conceptual literature is organized around Marx's (1990 [1867]) notion of "commodity fetishism". The second (2-2) conceptual literature will be that organized around a contemporary psychoanalytic notion of the "fetish" as it arises in the works of Žižek (2006, 2008, 2008 [1989], 2012) and Edelman (2005 [2004]). I will flesh out these conceptual definitions prior to turning to a review of the contemporary literature on the current historical context of ethical consumption (2-3) as a way of framing the textual analysis and that will follow.

### 2-1. Commodity Fetishism

My review of the literature on commodity fetishism will consist of the primary material from Marx's *Capital*, and interpretations and nuances of this concept by Žižek (2006, 2009), as well as the way that this concept has been operationalized within the context of ethical consumption, especially Carrier (2010) and Barnett and his colleagues (2005).

In Volume I of *Capital*, very early in the unfolding of his critique of political economy, Marx illuminates what he calls "commodity fetishism" (1990 [1867]: 163). His analysis of the commodity form and its primacy in capitalism has been tremendously

influential in critical analyses of culture and capitalism since its initial formulation. In a short section in the first chapter ("The Commodity") of the first volume *Capital*, Marx (1990 [1867]) makes a very precise point about the appearance of the value of commodities: that the relation of value between commodities in capitalism is an obfuscation of their essentially social production (and of the extractive features of that production). Following from Marx, I define "commodity fetishism" as the description of a byproduct of the social relations of production under capitalism characterized by the misrecognition of exchange-value as stemming from some innate value of the object (i.e., the commodity) itself. What follows demonstrates both the form that this misrecognition takes as well as the actual source of value in the social relations of production under capitalism according to Marx.

Marx's analysis of this relationship between commodities follows a very systematic trajectory, but at the outset he mentions, in passing, that though "[a] commodity appears at first sight an obvious, trivial thing… its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" (Marx 1990 [1867]: 163). In order to situate my analysis of ethical consumption within a discussion of Marx's notion of commodity fetishism, I will perform my own brief exegesis of this oft-cited passage from *Capital*: "The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret" (Marx 1990 [1867]: 163).

While from the current historical context, a phrase like "commodity fetishism" seems to refer to the power that the commodity wields over the consumer, this is not the case *per se*. Marx is here not concerned with the "worship" of commodities associated

with more recent popular critiques of capitalism, though the case could be made that such an interpretation is made possible through extrapolation.

Speaking as if he were a commodity, Marx asserts, "our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value. Our own interest as commodities proves it. We relate to each other merely as exchange-values" (1990 [1867]: 177). The irony implied by the anthropomorphising of the commodity by forcing it to speak for itself and its comrades would be exactly Marx's goal in this excerpt; he states that commodity fetishism "reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labor as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart and outside the producers" (1990 [1867]: 165), as if the objects themselves had the meaningful relationships with one another and not the objects to the human beings that created them. Marx's concern is precisely the anthropomorphism of commodities: the way that the relation between commodities (i.e., their exchange-values) appears to be a social relation between commodities in capitalism, when this is not the case. Each of Marx's terms (i.e., use-values, exchange-value, and value) has a very precise definition in his economic analysis.

Use-value refers to the qualitative characters of an object itself: its sensuousness, its material composition, and most apparently, its usefulness as a material object (e.g., a chair is useful for sitting on) (Marx 1990 [1867]: 163). Further, "use-values are realized… in consumption" (Marx 1990 [1867]: 126), increasing the relevance of their elaboration to a critique of consumer culture (i.e., since use-values are realized *in consumption*, they are relevant *to consumers*). This is not the form of value with which Marx is primarily concerned, since, as it will become more evident, Marx is concerned

with the source of an objects' *value*, which he takes to be *social labor*. Early in *Capital*,

Marx acts as if commodities are physical objects whose "usefulness does not dangle in

mid-air" (1990 [1867]: 126), betraying the materialist bias of his notion of

"commodities." However, commodities (or aspects thereof) need not be physically or

materially useful; they may be psychologically useful (either instead or as well).

Exchange-value (incisively) refers to the quantitative matrix of exchange

according to some magnitude of valuation (i.e., quantified social labour). While at first

glance exchange-value "appears… as the quantitative relation, the proportion, in which

use-values of one kind exchange for use-values of another kind," Marx dismisses this

interpretation simply by indicating toward the observation of varying exchange-values

across space and time (1990 [1867]: 126). The exchange-value of the commodity must

have some common denominator that determines its magnitude; disregarding use-value,

because Marx has eliminated it as the real source of "value" of the object, only abstract

human social labor remains.

In Marx's formulation, a commodity's exchange-value does not come from its

use-value, but instead through its value "determined by the quantity of labor expended to

produce it" in a highly abstract sense as "the total labor-power of society… composed of

innumerable individual units of labor-power" (1990 [1867]: 129). Therefore, exchange-

value is derived from "socially necessary labor-time," or "the labor time which is

necessary on an average… under the conditions of production normal for a given society

and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labor prevalent in that society"

(Marx 1990 [1867]: 129). The only relation between exchange-value and use-value is that

in order for a commodity to have an exchange-value, it must have a use-value for a future consumer.

In a sense, the fetishism of commodities refers to the initial formulation of exchange-value immediately dismissed by Marx: that some quality of the commodity itself (i.e., use-value) determines the quantity of its value relative to other commodities (i.e., exchange-value). This *rejected* formulation could resemble the following (temporalized) equation:

1) *use-value (= value as some measurable element of the object) → exchange-value*

Marx maintains that this formulation is the misunderstanding that characterizes the fetishism of commodities. Instead, Marx asserts that the real source of exchange-value is socially necessary labor time, i.e.,:

2) *value (i.e. labor time) (+ the production of some qualitative use-value) → exchange-value*

In this second (2) formulation, use-value is merely the quality that realizes the magnitude of value. Use-value's only function in commodity production – though necessary – is as a kind of binary on-off switch for value to become exchange-value, not as the determiner of exchange-value itself.

Though the commodity is not a form of value and/or product of labor unique to capitalism, it is only in capitalism that commodity production becomes the primary mode of production. The distinction between commodities and other products of labor is that commodities are produced *for their exchange-value*. They are *not* produced for their use-value, even if they must necessarily have some useful quality. Marx's critique of the

11

production of commodities for exchange goes on to focus on the creation of the surplus-value that will inevitably create profit for those who own the means of production (i.e., capitalists). Though this dynamic remains vitally important to understanding the persistent inegalitarian global distribution of the means of production (capital, including money), it is not immediately relevant to an understanding of the individual consumer's psychic (or lack-thereof) relation to the commodity.

The notion of socially necessary labor power determining the value of a commodity may seem to fly in the face of the received economic wisdom that fluctuating market prices in a consumer capitalist context are the effects of shifts in "supply and demand," but it is a basic tenet of Marxian thought. After all, the particular relationship of consumers to commodities is through the act of exchange (i.e., consumption, through a medium of exchange like money), not necessarily through the commodities' direct production. This distinction is only possible in the abstract: an abstract consumer relates to commodities through consumption, whereas in reality, consumers are people with jobs (i.e., producers). This understanding maintains a sharp distinction between producers and consumers (without, for the moment, implicating capitalists, themselves often touted as the real "job creators" and "producers" through their mobilization of capital in the service of commodity production). However, this vulgar binary understanding of consumption as a primarily exchange-oriented relationship to commodities obscures the generative power mobilized by consumers and the historical emergence of consumer *culture* as that which is produced by the emergence of consumption as both a historically contingent tendency of capitalism (as it has unfolded) and a possibility within the structures of capitalism.

In the Marxian formulation, the consumer's relation to the commodity is primarily through its appearance as an object of exchange. Most important to the Marxian formulation of commodity fetishism is that fetishism does not end by demystifying the fetish character by exposing the hidden abstract human social labor constituting the commodity. Commodity fetishism is internal to the very mechanisms and social relations of capitalism, or as Žižek puts it, "commodity fetishism… is not located in our mind, in the way we (mis)perceive reality, but in our social reality itself" (2006:94). As long as there are commodities, there is the appearance of a separate and distinct relation between these objects. A world without commodity fetishism is not a world without fetishism, but indeed and only a world without the commodity form.

Further, since Marx is strictly describing an ontological reality of life in capitalism, there is nothing necessarily "normative" in any moral sense about commodity fetishism: commodity fetishism is the description of (misperceived) social relations, not a "belief" with moral repercussions. Though Marx is highly critical of the general social relations of production under capitalism and the more specific, local, and undeniably atrocious working conditions of the European proletariat in the 1800s, there is nothing connoting being "bad" *per se* for being a victim of commodity fetishism (or even a notion of being a "victim" or "perpetrator" of commodity fetishism). Commodity fetishism is the inevitable outcome of social relations, not an indication of the moral status of the subjects implicated within those relations. The communist *telos* of Marx's writings pertains to capitalist totality as a fundamentally unjust distribution of the means of production. To be able to see commodities as they really are, "as a simple embodiment of social relations between people," is not a more highly valued subject position, because

"by means of your participation in social exchange, you bear witness to the uncanny fact that a commodity really appears to you as a magical object endowed with special powers" (Žižek 2006, 94). Ultimately, there is no subject "outside" commodity fetishism; seeing "through" the fetishism does not eliminate the material social relations leading to fetishism in the first place, that is, the universalization of the commodity form itself.

This reality stands in sharp contrast to the task taken up by geography according to Barnett et. al. (2005), who conceive of the role of geography being that of generating "knowledge of chains of consequences" in the consumption of commodities. Barnett *et al.* contend that:

> critical accounts of the politics of commodification rest on an analytics of mis-recognition, according to which responsible action requires the development of geographical imaginations, or cognitive maps, that connect spatially and temporally distanciated actions and consequences through the provision of explanatory knowledge. (2005: 25-26)

In their formulation, geographers assign themselves the task of demystifying or revealing the hidden steps the commodity production chain in order to map and identify those processes that are obscured by the reality of commodity fetishism. This understanding of the task of geography would amount to, for Žižek, a deceptive lure to see oneself outside of the social relations constituting that chain of consequences.

Carrier (2010) identifies at least three (3) different ways that this notion of the misrecognition of commodity fetishism conceals the social production of an ethical commodity, namely by concealing: 1) the creation of the object itself; 2) the conditions under which the commodity is purchased or enjoyed (i.e., consumed), and; 3) the natural

environment from which the commodity was extracted. In the first form, the object is removed from the context in which it was produced, leading to the misrecognition of the object as possessing ethical qualities itself. This is perhaps the most basic form of commodity fetishism, but Carrier (2010) extends the notion to refer not only to the object's exchange-value, but also to its capacity to render the "ethical" intelligible. In the second, any steps taken by the consumer toward the eventual enjoyment of the object are obscured in the moment of purchase (e.g., taking a plane to get to an eco-tourist resort). Finally, the third modality of fetishism presents the environment (from which the commodity is extracted or even the environment turned into a commodity itself, as in eco-tourism) as "natural," untouched, or renewed (Carrier 2010).

This sentiment is expanded upon by Coles and Crang (2011) in their concept of narrative of origins as a "double commodity fetish" (2012: 89). They show how in many cases of ethical consumption, the narrative of the origin of the commodity becomes part of what is sold. This is the case with the Tim Hortons Partnership Blend of coffee; part of the advertising strategy is to emphasize the origins of the coffees in the blend. In so doing, ethical consumption turns that narrative of origin in to a part of the commodity itself (Coles and Crang 2011), thus resulting in a double fetish.

However, the argument, according to the Žižekian (2006) interpretation of commodity fetishism, is precisely that this sort of cognitive mapping that attempts to trace the consequences and sources of commodity production does not "solve" commodity fetishism even if it *does* manage to demystify the fetishism of a particular commodity. Furthermore, Žižek (2009) maintains that

Marx's classic notion of commodity fetishism in which 'relations between people'

assume the form of 'relations between things' has thus to be radically re-thought:
in 'immaterial labour,' 'relations between people' are 'not so much hidden
beneath the veneer of objectivity, but are themselves the very material of our
everyday exploitation.' (139)

According to this account of fetishism, commodities are not simply social labor taking
the form of exchange-value in some material commodity. Instead, as is the case in service
economies that rely in large part on consumers, 'immaterial labor,' or labor that does not
produce some material object as its end, implicates the social relations between humans
themselves. Thus, when Tim Hortons' Partnership Program proclaims its relationships to
the consumer and the growers alike, this relationship takes on a mediated immaterial
dimension that hides the form that those relations take.

*2-2. Fetishism and the Ethical Void*

Following Žižek, I argue that the attempts to reveal the political economy of any
one, particular commodity, while informative, do not demystify the fetishism intrinsic to
the social relations of production in capitalism. Further still, this singular and particular
interpretation of the word "fetish" does not fully capture the potential psychic or
cognitive implications of consumption for any one consumer. Either of the Marxian or
the Žižekian interpretations of commodity fetishism specifically are, in fact, indifferent to
the cognitive status of the consumer: for Marx, knowledge of commodity fetishism is
only possible in the abstract, and for Žižek, more strongly, knowledge of commodity
fetishism amounts to a deceptive lure.

16

This second notion of commodity fetishism is influenced by psychoanalytic notions of sexual fetishism found originally in Freud and elaborated upon by Lacan; Edelman (2005 [2004]) and Žižek (2006, 2008, 2008 [1989], 2012) have between them elaborated a contemporary notion of "fetishism" drawing from these two original sources that I will use to nuance the more rigidly defined "commodity fetishism." I do so in order to construct or contribute to a notion of fetishism that includes an account of the psychic function of the fetish as a guarantor for action. The distinction that I am making here is between describing a historical context and positing the kinds of consciousness that such a context makes possible; I am theorizing ethical consumer consciousness, not simply the historical context of ethical consumption, though an account of such a context will become necessary in order to situate consciousness within historical (social and cultural) conditions of possibility.

Whereas Marxian commodity fetishism persists as part of the social reality of capitalism even when its specific conditions are more or less known, psychoanalytic fetishism constitutes "a refusal to know" (Cluley and Dunne 2012: 256). Žižek summarizes the differences between Marxian and psychoanalytic conceptions of fetishism, writing "in Marxism a fetish conceals the positive network of social relations, whereas in Freud a fetish conceals the lack ('castration') around which the symbolic network is articulated" (2008 [1989]: 50). Robert Cluley and Stephen Dunne, citing Žižek (amongst others), refer to this form of fetishism as an "*as if*" moment: consumers "often act *as if* they did not know what they know only all too well, namely, that the consumed commodity may not have been the best possible choice" (2012: 254). Fetishism understood this way introduces the psychic distinction between "knowing" and "wanting

17

to know," where "I know, but I don't want to know that I know, so I don't know" or "I know it, but I refuse to fully assume the consequences of this knowledge, so that I can continue acting as if I don't know it" (Žižek 2008: 53). This disavowal is the form that fetishism takes in Žižek: Truth becomes subject to desire in such a way that one can act *as if* the actual state of affairs were not the case.

Lee Edelman's (2005 [2004]) *No Future* is a psychoanalytic analysis of (and queer political polemic against) what he has termed "reproductive futurism." In his analysis, Edelman takes issue with the "reproductive futurism" of American political discourse, wherein both the figure of "the Child" and the capacity for human reproduction remain cornerstones of the promise of the nation's (or even humanity's) future (2005:2). His analysis is pertinent precisely because it attempts to politicize a discourse that has been depoliticized (i.e., the sanctity of childhood) in a way similar to how ethical consumption attempts to depoliticize consumer ethics. Following Edelman, I argue that ethical consumer consciousness may be similarly characterized by what I will call "consumptive futurism," a commitment to the psychic fetish function of the ethical commodity.

In Edelman's (2005 [2004]) argument, children become the agents that "secure" the meaningfulness of the future. Against this uncontested logic of reproductive futurism, Edelman proposes "a queer oppositionality that would oppose itself to the structural determinants of politics as such, which is to say, that would oppose itself to the logic of opposition" (2005 [2004], 4). Practically speaking, Edelman's polemic is against the coordinates of the polemic constituting the American belief in the promise of human reproduction. Against an uncontested logic of reproduction, one must choose the

unchoosable choice: to not reproduce. Edelman maintains that his "queer" "paradoxical

formulation suggests a refusal – the appropriately perverse refusal that characterizes

queer theory – of every substantialization of identity, which is always oppositionally

defined, and, by extension, of history as linear narrative (the poor man's teleology) in

which meaning succeeds in revealing itself – *as itself* – through time" (2005:4). This

queer reading is opposed to a more standard, heteronormative construction of the

function of sex as reproduction, and indeed flies in the face of a logic of reproducing the

family even within a same-sex relationship.

As I would have it put, "consumptive futurism," derived from the logic of

Edelman's (2005) "reproductive futurism," similarly orients consumer practices toward

the notion that ethical consumption is an uncontestable means through which the

meaningfulness of the future (i.e., social and environmental value) is secured. In the place

of the Child, consumptive futurism places the Commodity (i.e., the consumer

commodity). The capitalization of the "c" in "Commodity" in this case connotes its

figural function as the guarantor of symbolization associated with the Lacanian "big

Other" in the same sense as Edelman's "Child"; the "future" becomes intelligible only

through its symbolization rendered possible by an experience mediated through

commodity consumption.

The ethical commodity is related to "consumptive futurism" in the sense implied

by Lacan's inversion of Dostoyevski:

 As you know, the father Karamazov's son Ivan leads the latter into those

 audacious avenues taken by the thought of the cultivated man, and in particular,

 he says, *if God doesn't exist… – If God doesn't exist*, the father says, *then*

*everything is permitted*. Quite evidently, a naïve notion, for we analysts know full

well that if God doesn't exist, then nothing at all is permitted any longer.

Neurotics prove that to us every day. (Cited in Žižek 2006: 91)

Because there is a figural guarantor for action (the Father, God, Lacan's big Other, the

Child, the Commodity, etc.), one may act in certain ways. It is only when this fetish

object is "revealed" or experienced as the lack of symbolic guarantees itself (insofar as

that is possible) that nothing is permitted and rather "everything is prohibited" (Žižek

2006: 92). Ethical consumption attempts to circumvent the problem of the *as if* moment

of consumption by providing a figural guarantee that the consumption taking place is of

an ethical character.

There is a set of literatures about ethical consumption that attempt to create a

theoretical distinction between the moral and the ethical implications of consumption.

The ethnographic research conducted by Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler (2010) on the

narratives espoused by enthusiasts and critics of the sports utility vehicle (SUV)

"Hummer" (incisively titled "Consumer Identity Work as Moral Protagonism: How Myth

and Ideology Animate a Brand-Mediated Moral Conflict") reveals the dynamics of

fetishism and disavowal present in many justifications for adopting a certain type of

consumption over another (2010). Hummer enthusiasts were capable of framing their

consumption choices within the context of preserving and enjoying nature. Their

respondent Robert, for example, paraphrased that

My whole family's religious conviction is to go out in the world and enjoying its

ambience. And this Jeep allows me to get to places where I will never get

otherwise. Some of these are pretty magnificent places. And you'll never see

them. (Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010: 66)

Robert is able to frame his SUV lifestyle as a choice that actually brings him closer to

nature; he is able to disavow the hydrocarbons that his consumption is responsible for

emitting by choosing to focus on the social meaning that his consumption choice

generates for him and his family (Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010).

Although there is a noted (by Connolly and Prothero 2008, Adams and

Raisborough 2010) lack of ethnographic research engaging directly with ethical

consumers attitudes toward their own consumption choices (either individuals that may

choose to consume ethically or individuals that identify as "ethical consumers"), there is

an empirical precedent for including a discussion of fetishism as an object that conceals

the void implied by ethical responsibility by guaranteeing the object's its moral value. In

Connolly and Prothero's (2008) study of green consumption, they noted respondents

"moralizing tendency" to articulate their own consumption choices in relation to some

"other consumption" that was worse. Pleasure was taken in maintaining one's identity as

a green consumer outside of a posited "mainstream culture" of this "other consumption."

Whereas respondents articulated ambivalence toward the times they were forced to

consume unethically or against their green convictions, they did not articulate the same

ambivalence in regards to their environmental practices (Connolly and Prothero 2008).

Observing a similar tendency to that found in Connolly and Prothero's

ethnography, Adams and Raisborough's (2010) discuss consumers' experiences of their

own ethical consumption practices. Adams and Raisborough's research indicates

"correspondents talked about being ethical or 'making a difference' through consumption

in terms of trying to be or do 'good'" (261). Further, they suggest that their data indicates that the conflation of "doing good" with Fairtrade products, for example, obviates the reflexivity required by ethical choices.

Such practices coincide with Soper's (2007) contention that ethical consumption has moral rewards. She argues that such moral rewards include the "sensual pleasures of consuming differently" (211) and "a distinctly moral form of self-pleasuring or a self-interested form of altruism: that which takes pleasure in committing to a more socially accountable mode of consuming" (213). Soper (2007) refers to this tension as "alternate hedonism."

Soper's (2007) concept of "alternate hedonism" attempts to blur the assumed line between self-interest and social responsibility implied by ethical consumption by pointing to all of the different ways in which self-interest and altruism interact within a social context. According to Soper, alternate hedonism "distinguishes between the sensual pleasures and the moral rewards of consuming sustainably, and at the same time recognizes the extent to which these differing motives and gratifications may come together or be over-determining in the case of ethical or 'virtuous' consumption" (212). Soper's concept helps to understand how an "egoistic rationale for changing consumption will very often, one suspects, be coloured by something more altruistic, and vice-versa" (213). Thus it becomes extremely difficult in a social context to distinguish "morality" as a social norm from "the moral" as a pleasure taken in self-judgment and self-understanding.

It must be noted that the meanings of "moral" and "ethical" are themselves often conflated in much of the literature regarding ethical consmption. Ethics might, in a

Foucauldian sense, refer simply to practical choices about personal conduct (Barnett et. al. 2005: 28), or perhaps to a more radical ethics wherein "one acts from the position of the inexistence of the big Other, assuming the abyss of the act deprived of any guarantee of support" (Žižek 2012:118). These disparate notions of ethics may be contrasted yet again to a notion of "moral selving," referring "to the mediated work of creating oneself as a more virtuous person through practices that acknowledge responsibilities to others" (Barnett et. al. 2005: 30). This process of "moral selving" is separate and distinct from either of the two proposed conceptions of ethics because of its emphasis on the basis for the judgment of an action, whereas the Foucauldian conception of ethics (in Barnett et al. 2005) is practically indifferent (though not immune) to normative content and the Žižekian conception of ethics denies any basis for such a judgment.

Carrier's (2010) concept of "ethicality" is a very fitting way to understand the function of the "fetish" in ethical consumption, but it stops short of positing a "void" between the object and the symbolic guarantee it makes possible. For Carrier (2010), the ethicality of an object refers to its capacity to render meaning legible at the conceptual level; the commodity becomes a signifier of the moral criteria it connotes (i.e., the signified).

The sense of moral certainty implied by "ethicality" corresponds to Žižek's definition of cultural capitalism, wherein "[f]ar from being invisible, social relationality in its very fluidity is directly the object of marketing and exchange: in 'cultural capitalism,' one no longer sells (and buys) objects which 'bring' cultural or emotional experiences, one directly sells (and buys) such experiences" (2009: 139). The ethical relationships and responsibilities between producers, consumers, and business-owners

become the objects of exchange in ethical consumption. As a consumer, one buys an object that not only includes the experience of being a responsible moral (i.e., ethical as a fetish word) subject, but also or in fact, buys the experience of moral-selving.

This psychoanalytically nuanced notion of fetishism actually represents a return to a religious (or at least metaphysical) understanding of the fetish as an object that appears to have special powers (perhaps the "metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" to which Marx was referring, 1990 [1867]: 163). Such an analysis is supported by Jackson, and Pepper's (2011) discussion of consumerism as a form of secular theodicy, wherein "theodicy" refers to "the attempt to come to terms with the existence of suffering and 'evil' in our lives" (18). In the face of the suffering and "evil" consumers still experience in contemporary social relations, ethical commodities simultaneously offer hedonic pleasures and symbolic guarantees of "goodness." Soper's (2007) "alternate hedonism" is implicated yet again, wherein ethical commodities are consumed not only for altruistic reasons (e.g., social justice, environmentalism), but also because consumption is pleasurable *in itself*. Further, the pleasure taken in "moral selving" is a hedonic "moral reward" of such altruism (Soper 2007); it thus becomes impossible (or at least extremely difficult) to distinguish between these two ends of the spectrum (i.e., hedonism and altruism) in practice.

*2-3. The Historical Context of Ethical Consumption*

The current literature on ethical consumption situates the practice within the contemporary context of what has been termed neoliberal governance (especially Miller and Rose 1997, and Rose 2008 [1999]) and risk society (Giddens 1991, Beck 1992). Rose

has indicated that under the regime of neoliberal government "it has become possible to govern without governing *society* – to govern through the 'responsibilized' and 'educated' anxieties and aspirations of individuals and their families" (Rose 2008 [1999]: 88). Government refers to government at a distance, through the actions of individual agents assumed to be rational and self-serving. Further, Miller and Rose (1997:1) have identified that "many diagnoses of our 'postmodern condition' hinge upon debates about consumption." Neoliberal consumption refers therefore to the practice of governing individual consumers – and individuals consumers governing themselves – in and through their consumption.

In reference to consumer credit, Payne (2011) writes "neoliberalism referenced consumers as entrepreneurs; as such they would need access to finance, access not rationed by the availability of savings, but finance that could be granted by the creation of deposits against loans, priced on an assessment of risk" (121). Payne's (2011) entrepreneurial consumer is this rational and self-interested agent assumed by neoliberal government at a distance, who is assumed to be fully aware of the risks of investment and credit (in this context). Thus the neoliberal consumer is one that is assumed to be fully aware of the consequences of his or her own consumption.

Connolly and Prothero (2008) incisively summarize Giddens' (1991) and Beck's (1992) understanding of what it means to live in a risk society:

> that it is not that progress has not been achieved or that present-day life is
> inherently more risky than was the case of previous eras. Rather, for lay
> individuals as well as experts of specific fields, thinking in terms of risk and risk

assessment is a more or less ever-present exercise of a partly imponderable

character. (122)

Risk is not necessarily "higher" by any quantitative measure in the so-called risk society;

the argument it is rather that subjects of risk society are more aware of risks now than in

any prior epoch in history (Connolly and Prothero 2008, Giddens 1991, Beck 1991).

Even if risk society refers to the prevalence of discourses of risk in general, I contend that

when it comes to the risks of some unchecked, unreflexive, or uninformed consumption

of the sort implied by ethical consumption as its opposite (i.e., purely egoistic

consumption in the abstract), consumers have also never had as many options available in

order to mitigate the perception of these risks. Connolly and Prothero (2008) refer to this

as the moralizing tendency of ethical consumption, wherein consumers generate an "other

consumption" that is worse for environmental or social reasons. The risks associated with

consumption are not immediate dangers to consumers, but likewise more abstract risks

associated with overconsumption, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution in

general, long term decreases in quality of life, exploitation of labor, etc.

Ethical consumption shares many of the same rationalities of neoliberal

governance and risk management as what has been termed "neoliberal conservation." In

their discussion of neoliberal conservation, Büscher *et al.* (2012) characterize

"neoliberalism" as "a *political ideology* that aims to subject political, social, and

ecological affairs to capitalist dynamics" (5). Strategies of neoliberal conservation

include "protected areas, education programs, ecotourism, mitigation offset schemes (like

carbon credit systems), payment for ecosystem services, trade interventions, rewilding

programs," in an attempt to make conserving nature a profitable endeavor (Büscher et al.

2012: 7). In fact, despite the fact that the ecological contradiction of capitalism (i.e., that exploitation and extraction are responsible for ecological devastation, climate change, and biodiversity loss) was caused by market mechanisms, neoliberal conservation maintains not only that markets are the solution, but also that profit remains the *only* viable solution to saving nature (Büscher et al. 2012: 7). Ethical consumption, therefore, attempts to implicate the consumer in this production process by creating access to goods that remedy the past consequences of unrestrained overconsumption and the crises caused by such activity *en mass*.

In addition to this logic of conservation, neoliberalism has also rationalized the practices of charity and philanthropy as profit-driven endeavors. A term created by Bishop and Green (2008), "Philanthrocapitalism" is used by supporters and critics alike to refer to profit-oriented charity wherein "altruism is a useful business strategy" for affluent business owners (McGoey 2012: 187). McGoey (2012) further notes that such a conflation of profit and charity, of self-interest and the common good, has actually been prevalent since the moral philosophy of Adam Smith conflated individuals acting in their own self-interest as the best way to promote the common good. She maintains that the real contribution of neoliberal philanthrocapitalism to this rich history is that, perhaps for the first time, the explicit discourse of self-interest in the place of an implicit moral philosophy. Such philanthropy is "impact oriented, market-savvy and cost-effective… assum[ing] a moral hierarchy of philanthropic value that is structured according to measurable financial benefit" (McGoey 2012: 193).

*2-4. Problematizing Governmentality*

One of the limits of the governmentality approach to neoliberalism, as indicated by Soper (2007), is that it cannot distinguish between objective and subjective needs or responsibilities. Soper maintains that there is a "properly political type of need that can only legitimately be said to exist insofar as there is some experience and acknowledgement of it" (218). Thus, while neoliberalism is blamed for increasingly responsibilizing individuals for risk management (e.g., mitigating the effects of overconsumption by consuming better), such a responsibility is not necessarily experienced *as anxiety inducing.* To the extent that forms of ethical consumption like Tim Hortons Partnership Blend can help in mitigating this anxiety, it must also be stated that neoliberalism provides the historical conditions of possibility for the resolution of the anxieties that it generates. Such a pattern is the very content of neoliberal conservation, where in response to the detrimental ecological impact of past production practices in the pursuit of pure profit, conservation takes on the responsibility of remedying these crises while, all the while, still generating profit.

Further, I contend that the distinction between objective and subjective responsibilization is instructive precisely because, since neoliberalism defines the present structure of social relations as the historical condition of possibility for certain types of conscious (or unconscious) psychic activity, the "responsibilization" thesis of governmentality literature refers to an *objective* description of a particular modality of governing the subject. In neoliberalism, responsibilization occurs as an individual, in contrast to prior epochs wherein social welfare may have been the main mechanism of governance and responsibilization (Rose 1999). This conjecture corresponds with Rose's

thesis that "freedom" represents a discursive technology that governs the subject in and through that freedom so that, for example, the freedom of consumer choice is actually a circumscribed kind of freedom that implies being governed in and through consumption (e.g., having credit, choosing to consume ethically, etc.). Responsibilization then becomes a hypothesis about the objective character of governance in a historical context, not the subject experience of that governance in that context. It thus becomes possible to speak of the paradoxical "objective" responsibilization of the consumer whilst maintaining that ethical consumption actually decreases the "subjectively" experienced anxiety of having to choose what and how to consume by guaranteeing the ethical (i.e., moral) efficacy of a particular commodity.

The goal of this thesis is to attempt to clarify how or in fact whether (if at all) the individual subject experiences this "objective" responsibilization from the standpoint of the consumption of ethical commodities. While the relationship of the commodity to the neoliberal conditions of production are characterized by commodity fetishism, and the relationship between the neoliberal conditions of production and the ethical consumer are at least objectively those of individuating ethical "responsibilization," I will be working toward an understanding of the subjective experience of the consumer in relation to the ethical commodity that remains under-theorized in the contemporary ethnographic literature.

## 3. Data and Methods

This research employs a mixed methodological approach. The data constituting this study is drawn from the gap between the Coffee Partnership Program as it is detailed on Tim Hortons' website and the advertising for the Partnership Blend of coffee, which does not contain the same information. Since the campaign for the Partnership Blend of coffee does not reference the goals (pillars) of the larger program within which it is situated, it functions as a fetish concealing the void between not only the commodity itself (i.e., a bag of Partnership Blend coffee) and the labor involved in its production (i.e., coffee farming), but also the commodity and the market logic imposed upon the conservation and humanitarian efforts advanced in the Partnership Program.

The Partnership Blend Coffee advertising proclaims, in keeping with the larger umbrella of Tim Hortons' commitment to "Making a True Difference," that "Tim Hortons Partnership Blend" is "Making a true difference in coffee-growing communities." In order to achieve this goal, "$1 from every purchase helps support our Coffee Partnership Program." The page introducing consumers to the Parnership Blend proclaims that "The goal of Tim Hortons Coffee Partnership is to improve the lives of small-scale coffee farmers by increasing the productivity of their farms and the quality of their beans in an environmentally sustainable way."

The information in this advertising for the Partnership Blend will be compared and contrasted to the broader information provided about Tim Hortons' Coffee Partnership program. The information about the Coffee Partnership program goes in to more detail about the specific policy directives of Tim Hortons on the ground in the regions that the program operates. These descriptions will enable a demonstration of how

the Coffee Partnership program constitutes a neoliberal business endeavor in order to situate my discussion of what it is (or rather, what it is not) that the consumer knows (or does not know) about the Partnership Blend Coffee that he or she has purchased.

My discussion of ethical consumer consciousness will be situated within the case study of Tim Hortons Partnership Blend Coffee and the historical context of neoliberalism. It will be theoretical, drawing from the Marxian and psychoanalytic understandings of fetishism outlined in the literature review above. Broadly speaking, my method is thus one that could be characterized as a dialectic between a phenomenology of ethical consumption and the historical (and cultural) conditions of possibility in which ethical consumption arises. This phenomenological account is further problematized by the relation of the subject's desire to the experience of the object itself (i.e., the Partnershp Blend Coffee) and the efficacy of that object in generating a pleasurable experience of moral self-identity (i.e., moral-selving).

Such an analysis will necessarily be textual, relying on the text evidence provided by Tim Hortons on their website. As indicated in the literature review, there is, in fact, an empirical precedent set wherein "ethical" (e.g., "green") consumers have, in qualitative ethnographic research, articulated an ambiguity around "normal," "other" consumption that was not articulated about ethical commodities (Connolly and Prothero 2008, Adams and Raisborough's 2010). Such an absence provides the basis for an elaboration of a theory of ethical consumer consciousness that can account for this tendency observed in ethnographic research.

Thus, I question the basis upon which claims to "ethicality" are made on two counts, namely: 1) A critique of contemporary ethical production practices, provided

mainly in the literature review above and; 2) A critique of "ethicality" implicating the tension between the desire to be moral and the pleasure taken in that act of moral-selving in Tim Hortons ethical consumption campaign.

Tim Hortons is by no means an "ethical" corporation, that is, not everything it does is toward "ethical" ends. It is, after all, a corporate business in pursuit of profits. Alongside the Partnership Blend Coffee, Tim Hortons continues to offer its popular (cheaper, and by comparison implicitly unethical or at least anethical) regular ground coffee. Thus, my case study is limited to only one campaign and not an entire business ethic. However, due to its existence across this distinction between ethical and other (or normal) consumption, it serves as an interesting and generative entry point into the narratives of ethical consumption *vis-á-vis* consumer's experiences of consumption as either morally rewarding or otherwise. Further research will need to be conducted into other ethical business models and campaigns in order to determine the extent of the proliferation of such narratives guaranteeing moral rewards to ethical consumers and any problematic dynamics or results that arise out of this potential self-understanding.

**4. Analysis**

The Tim Hortons Coffee Partnership Program is a three-part neoliberal campaign that combines together elements of neoliberal conservation, philanthrocapitalism, and the profit logic of markets. The three pillars of the program, couched within the context of the broader campaign of Tim Hortons to "Make a True Difference," reveal that it is situated within this historical context. In order to situate a theory of consumer consciousness within this historical context using the case study of Tim Hortons Coffee Partnership Program, I will first demonstrate, with reference to the three pillars of the program, that the program is, in fact, an extension of this neoliberal rationality. I will then move from this general classification in to an account of how the Partnership Blend Coffee campaign and commodity acts as a fetish not only concealing not only the neoliberal processes of production of this particular commodity, but also guaranteeing the moral value of this commodity.

*4-1. Tim Hortons: "Making a [Neoliberal] Difference"*

The first pillar of the Tim Hortons Partnership Program is the economic pillar, which claims that Tim Hortons helps "coffee farmers earn a better living by training them to be better farmers and run better businesses" (2012). Perhaps nowhere else is the neoliberal imperative of profit thrown in to sharper relief than it is in this pillar of the program. "Successful" coffee farmers must be "better business people" (Tim Hortons 2012); there are no other criteria for success mentioned within the information for this pillar. As part of this paradigm, "Coffee farmers learn a wide array of skills to help increase the quality and the yield of their coffee crops. This, in turn, provides them with a

better income. They also learn to run their farms like businesses, increasing their profitability and long-term sustainability" (Tim Hortons 2012).

Two strategies that Tim Hortons lists for implementing the change implied by the economic pillar are 1) "Establishing technical training in agronomy and farm management to improve the quantity and quality of coffee produced," and 2) "Helping farmers organize into larger groups within their communities to reduce costs and ensure their coffee gets to market at the best time and at the best price." (2012). In addition to the colonial/historical undertones of this project (which, while important, are beyond the scope of this analysis), the economic pillar explicitly organizes production according to the rationalities of efficacy and corporate structures. Quality *and* quantity must be improved, and farmers must move toward a formal organization of individual coffee farmers into cohesive groups. The economic pillar corresponds to neoliberal philanthrocapitalism such that "helping people" becomes synonymous with "helping people help themselves," which translates into "making better businesspeople"; a failure to make self-sufficient, industrious capitalists would imply failure of the program.

It is worth noting that everywhere on the Partnership Program website, the economic pillar is the first pillar: in side menus, in text boxes, and in infographics. Though it would be perhaps presumptuous to state that the economic pillar is the most important pillar to Tim Hortons' entire project in the regions in which it operates, as Tim Hortons never explicitly states this anywhere on the website, there is privileging of the economic pillar that is *implied* by this recurrent structuring; the social and environmental pillars (roughly corresponding to philanthropy and conservation) are subjugated, or at least secondary, to the market logic of the economic pillar.

The second (and, as noted, perhaps secondary) pillar of the Coffee Partnership Program is the social pillar, which "empower[s] youth and improve[es] the education of children of coffee farmers so they have the opportunity for a better future" (Tim Hortons 2012). This pillar relies heavily on the dense symbolic and affective meanings of children and childhood – meanings that Edelman (2005 [2004]) attempts to subvert and problematize in his account of reproductive futurism. Quite explicitly, Tim Hortons avows this futurism when it states, "the future of a coffee farming community, like any other community, depends on its children" (2012). By working with Junior Achievement (JA), Tim Hortons enters into relationships with local schools in the Trifinio region "to provide aspiring youth with the skills they need to become successful *entrepreneurs and leaders in their communities*" (2012, emphasis mine).

Thus there is a paternalistic undertone that mirrors the colonial tone of the economic pillar, wherein Tim Hortons and JA determine the content that corresponds to the improvement of the social conditions in the regions of the Partnership Program, namely learning the skills of and capacities associated with 1) entrepreneurship, and 2) individualism. A indication that the Partnership Progam has been successful would be that future generations of coffee farmers become either better business people, or better community leaders in a context where "better" refers to "more amenable to business imperatives." Thus Tim Hortons, and neoliberal philanthrocapitalist enterprises, create the conditions of possibility for future profit in the region by training children that will, hopefully, welcome such profit-seeking endeavors back with open arms[1].

---

[1] There is also an interesting comparison to be made between the neoliberal educational rationality or paradigm of skills "training" versus critical thinking; this distinction is beyond the scope of the current analysis, but could perhaps serve as the basis for future investigations into such programs.

Third, and finally (tertiary?), the environmental pillar refers to Tim Hortons policy around "educating coffee farmers and helping them adopt more environmentally sound and sustainable coffee farming practices" (2012). Such language sets up the farmers like "imagined primitives" that are unaware of the environmental impact of "modern production" processes (West 2012). The images conjured by this language is of farmers overworking their fields and scorching their earth in order to gratify themselves immediately instead of guaranteeing their own long term sustenance, and of a beneficent and benevolent (again, at once colonial and paternal) corporation that hopes to convince them to adhere to sustainable production practices for their own sake. There is no mention of either 1) the pressure exerted upon farmers by industry to adopt modern production practices that could be detrimental to the environment, or 2) the desire farmers may have already to produce in ways such that they do not compromise the relationship they desire with their environment (ecology, biodiversity, climate etc.).

Again, Tim Hortons relies on "Training" which "covers soil analysis for effective fertilizer use, elimination of harmful pesticides, the importance of shade, conservation of biodiversity and soil-erosion prevention strategies" (2012). Further, "one of the most important areas of focus in this category is water – one of the coffee farmer's most precious resources" (Tim Hortons 2012). All of these strategies for protecting the regions' environment and creating sustainable coffee production practices are listed as if they refer to production practices that emerged out of a vacuum inhabited by the less enlightened coffee farmers. There is no mention of how fertilizers and pesticides, for example, reached these coffee farmers, and the types of incentives made available to

coffee farmers in the past for adopting them (aside from increased production at the cost of environmental degradation).

"Making a True Difference," then, ironically refers to doing things exactly the same way that every other neoliberal organization would do them within these three contexts (i.e., the three pillars of economy, society, and environment, and their particular neoliberal market, charity, and conservation logics). There is, as yet, no indication of Tim Hortons' sense of success or efficacy with the Coffee Partnership program available on the website apart from the more abstract numbers of relationships that were cited in the introduction to this thesis (i.e., that Tim Hortons has worked with over 3 400 farmers and influenced the lives of over 17 000 people). However, the pillars of the program itself reveal enough of what Tim Hortons would conceive of as "success" to be able to formulate an account of why it constitutes a neoliberal intervention in production, philanthropy, and conservation.

*4-2. A Partner in the Program: Morally Implicating the Ethical Consumer*

The central premise of this analysis of consumer consciousness is that consumers who choose to consume ethically would prefer moral certitude as the basis of their moral-selving rather than the moral ambiguity of a lack of moral guarantees. Such a claim appeals to a notion of "alternate hedonism" (Soper 2007) wherein there is an individual pleasure taken in moral-selving (even though morality is paradoxically altruistic in its axiomatic formulations) and also to a notion of the ambivalence associated with moral ambiguity being an unpleasant or even painful personal experience. Such a notion of ambivalence is advanced by Gould (2001) in her analysis of ambivalence as a condition

37

of possibility for social movements: ambivalence is an unpleasant affective state characterized by uncertainty and ambiguity from which individuals would prefer to be relieved or removed.

An important caveat to the following analysis is that it does not attempt to argue that what appears as moral to a consumer subject is, conversely, immoral; despite the fact that ambiguity, uncertainty, and ambivalence are conceived as unpleasant emotions, this analysis will proceed as indifferent to any actual claims about what is or is not moral or ethical. As such this analysis will only serve as the conditions of possibility for future political or ethical arguments, which is why this description serves only as a "towards" of an account of consumer consciousness.

I will begin, most superficially, by pointing out that any consumer that partakes in the Coffee Partnership Program equipped only with the information provided by the advertising for Partnership Blend Coffee would have no idea that the Coffee Partnership Program operates according to these three policy pillars, let alone that these pillars could be so problematic. Though they do not mobilize the language of fetishism, Adams and Raisborough (2010) and Connolly and Prothero (2008) both mention, in passing, that consumers of ethical or green commodities may disagree morally with the very neoliberal rationality of contemporary production, but such knowledge is concealed by: 1) the appearance of the commodity apart from the context of its social relations of production, and; 2) they speculate, based upon their limited ethnographic data, the pleasure taken in the "moral rewards" (Soper 2007) of consuming otherwise.

For this analysis, the most important dimension of this campaign and product line is that the consumer is directly and morally implicated within the "partnership" by the $1

from each purchase that goes toward Tim Hortons' Coffee Partnership Program. At the very least, this symbolic gesture of $1 from each purchase *permits* or creates the *conditions of possibility for* moral selving.

The rhetoric of the "Making a True Difference" campaign is particularly striking: there is no explicit discussion of what it might mean to make a "false difference," or the difference between a "True Difference" and simply "difference." The campaign provides the narrative conditions of possibility for a consumer to conceive of him- or herself as making a difference that is *implicitly* more authentic than another consumer choice. In Carrier's (2010) words, "ethicality" refers to the symbolic efficacy in conjuring an image that it is "used to represent a state of affairs that satisf[ies] ethical criteria[,] mak[ing] that satisfaction legible and com[ing] to define these criteria" (677). Ostensibly, the phrase "Making a True Difference" stands in for the more normative "Doing Good," because Tim Hortons would likely not want to advertise that it is making a difference by destroying the environments, economies, or social institutions of its partners (if that were the case). The $1 from each consumer purchase of the "Partnership Blend" supposedly entitles the consumer to the sense of "Doing Good" that the "Coffee Partnership Program" packages with its campaign.

Furthermore, the word "partnership," though most obviously referring to the business partnership between Tim Hortons and its farmers, also stands as a fetish concealing the void between the consumer and the farmer; "partnership" shortens the space morally and spatially between the point of production and the point of consumption. The consumer is permitted to see him- or herself as entering into a relationship with the farmer that is mediated by the act of exchange (consumption). As

39

Žižek has stated in the context of a discussion of Tom's Shoes "One for One" program (wherein for ever pair of shoes you buy, Tom's Shoes will give one pair to a child living in poverty), "in the very consumerist act you buy your redemption from being a consumerist [sic]": charity and vindication become internal to the logic of cultural capitalism ("RSA" 2009). The partnership between the consumer's act of consumption and the farmer's economic, social, and environmental conditions is one in which both consumer and farmer ostensibly come out ahead: the consumer, morally, and the farmer, financially, in a stronger community, with an intact environment.

The three pillars of the "Coffee Partnership Program" attempt to secure one's future both morally and in terms of the capacity to continue to consume (coffee, at least) by supporting the children of the farmers in coffee growing countries. One of the main goals of the "social" pillar of the program is "empowering youth and improving education of the children of coffee farmers so they have the opportunity for a better future" (Tim Hortons 2012). This "social pillar" is a clear distillation of the combination of "reproductive futurism" (Edelman 2005) and "consumptive futurism," though the reproductive justification is displaced: one ensures that, by consuming, the future generations of coffee farmers lead better lives (i.e., higher standard of living, quality of life as quantitative measurements), and be more empowered and more effective business people. The business imperative of the program is covered by the economic pillar, wherein Tim Hortons ensures us it is "helping coffee farmers earn a better living by training them to be better farmers and run better businesses" (2012). There is, of course, a naïve assumption made that, regardless of how "educated" the children of farmers may

become, there will still be someone to grow *my* (i.e, Tim Hortons' and the consumer's)

coffee.

## 5. Conclusion

Citing an unknown speaker, Jameson (2003) has remarked, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism" (76). The implication of this statement is that the symbolic coordinates that serve as the conditions of possibility for rendering reality intelligible to the subject are those provided by the social relations under capitalism, and in particular its more recent forms in neoliberalism and ethical consumption. He adds further that the current critical project is to "revise that [statement] and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world" (Jameson 2003: 76). This second statement directly confronts the fact that neoliberal, consumer capitalism is currently imagined as the solution to the world ending, that is to say, that one confronts the end of the world by embracing capitalism and consumption. Neoliberal business, philanthropic, and conservation efforts demonstrate the sentiment that the best solution to the crises generated by historical capitalism is more (and better) capitalism. Ethical consumption represents the individuated mechanism through which consumers are implicated in this matrix of renewal.

The preceding analysis has demonstrated that ethical consumption is a mechanism whereby consumers construct and maintain a sense of a moral self through "moral-selving" (Barnett et al. 2005), the modality of which is ethical consumption. The implication of the consumer directly within the purchase of Tim Hortons Partnership Blend Coffee through the concept of "Partner" and the conflation of "True" with "Good" creates the conditions of possibility for those consumers to conceive of themselves as moral selves. Additionally, such an act of moral-selving is complicated by the pleasurable moral rewards (Soper 2007) generated by understanding oneself as a moral self. Soper's

(2007) concept of "alternate hedonism" attempts to respect this complexity in the dynamic between hedonism and altruism by permitting both to exist in concert and tension with on another. Consumption, itself already conceived as a hedonistic and selfish activity, is mobilized in the name of altruistic ends through ethical consumption. This relationship is constituted in such a way that through morality – generally conceived as altruistic and, indeed, pleasure-denying – individual ethical consumers may take an "alternate" pleasure in the "moral rewards of consuming sustainably" (Soper 2007: 212). It does so always already within a context of neoliberalism that takes individualism, profit, and personal responsibility as given moral values (or at the very least normative behaviors).

This thesis has also shown that the responsibilization thesis of governmentality literature about neoliberalism (very usefully) describes a particular, individuating modality of responsibilizing the individual through his or her consumption by governing at a distance (Rose 1999, and Miller and Rose 1997), this description is only of the conditions of possibility structuring consciousness, and not necessarily a conscious experience directly.

An account of such consciousness in these conditions requires a theoretical and conceptual tool that allows for an explanation of a paradoxically decreased experience of the anxieties that would be associated with increased knowledge of risk (Beck 1992, and Giddens 1991) and of individuating responsibilization in this context that reckons with the (admittedly) preliminary ethnographic data generated about ethical consumption (most notably Connolly and Prothero 2008, and Adams and Raisborough's 2010). I have argued that an account of fetishism that goes beyond a description of the social relations

of production into a psychoanalytic understanding of the subjective and psychic experience of fetishism may reveal such insight.

Whether or not a psychoanalytically nuanced notion of fetishism inevitably reveals more about the effects of ethical consumption in the constitution of self-identity, the ethical and political consequences of such activity must be further theorized. I have attempted to omit these consequences in favor of describing the relationship between the consumer and the ethical commodity directly. Though geographers and political economists (e.g., Lewis and Potter 2011, Coles and Crang 2011, Barnett et al. 2005) have doubtless done a fantastic job describing and problematizing the space and relations between an ethical commodity and its production in a certain historical context – namely neoliberalism, with all that contexts' biases and presumptions – the space between the consumer and the ethical commodity remains under-theorized in favor of ethnographic data. A notion of fetishism as an object that conceals a lack of symbolic guarantees by saturating that object with affective and moral value (e.g., economic flourishing, socializing children properly, and protecting the environment, the three pillars of the Coffee Partnership Program) begins to theorize this constitutive gap between consumer experiences and production realities in such a way as to pave the way for ethical and political potentialities and problematizations.

## References

Adams, Matthew and Jayne Raisborough. 2010. "Making a Difference: Ethical

    Consumption and the Everyday." *The British Journal of Sociology* 61(2): 256-

    274.

Barnett, Clive, Paul Cloke, Nick Clarke, and Alice Malpass. 2005. "Consuming Ethics:

    Articulating the Subjects and Spaces of Ethical Consumption." *Antipode* 37(1):

    23-45.

Beck, Ulrich. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Bishop, Matthew and Michael Green. 2008. *Philanthrocapitalism: How the Rich can*

    *Save the World*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Press

Büscher, Bram, Sian Sullivan, Katja Neves, Jim Igoe, and Dan Brockington. 2012.

    "Toward a Synthesized Critique of Neoliberal Conservation." *Capitalism Nature*

    *Socialism* 23(2): 4-30.

Carrier, James G. 2010. "Protecting the Environment the Natural Way: Ethical

    Consumption and Commodity Fetishism." *Antipode* 42(3): 672-689.

Carrier, James G. 2012. "Introduction." Pp. 1-36 in *Ethical Consumption: Social Value*

    *and Economic Practice*, edited by J. G. Carrier and P. G. Luetchford. New York,

    NY: Berghahn Books.

Cluley, Robert and Stephen Dunne. 2012. "From commodity fetishism to commodity

    narcissism." *Marketing Theory* 12(3):251-65.

Coles, Benjamin and Philip Crang. 2011. "Placing alternative consumption: commodity

    fetishism in Borough Fine Foods Market, London." Pp. 87-102 in *Ethical*

*Consumption: A Critical Introduction*, edited by T. Lewis and E. Potter. Oxen, UK: Routledge.

Connolly, John and Andrea Prothero. 2008. "Green Consumption: Life-Politics, Risk, and Contradictions." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8(1): 117-145.

Datta, Ronjon Paul. 2011. "Security and the Void: Aleatory Materialism contra Governmentality." Pp. 217-242 in *Anti-Security*, edited by M. Neocleous and George S. Rigakos. Ottawa, ON: Red Quill Books.

Edelman, Lee. 2005 [2004]. *No Future*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Ewan, Stuart. 2001 [1997]. *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Gould, Deborah. 2001. "Rock the Boat, Don't Rock the Boat, Baby: Ambivalence and the Emergence of Militant AIDS Acivism." Pp. 135-37 in *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*, edited by J. Goodwin, J.M. Jasper, and F. Polletta. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Igoe, Jim, Katja Neves, and Dan Brockington. 2010. "A Spectacular Eco-Tour around the Historic Bloc: Theorising the Convergence of Biodiversity Conservation and Capitalist Expansion." *Antipode* 42(3): 486-512.

Jackson, Tim and Miriam Pepper. 2011. "Consumerism as Theodicy: Religious and Secular Meaning Functions in Modern Society." Pp. 17-36 in *Religion, Consumerism and Sustainability* edited by L. Thomas. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan.

Lewis, Tania and Emily Potter. 2011. "Introducing Ethical Consumption." Pp. 3-23 in

    *Ethical Consumption: A Critical Introduction* edited by T. Lewis and E. Potter.

    Oxen, UK: Routledge.

Luedicke, Marius K., Craig J. Thompson, and Markus Giesler. 2010. "Consumer Identity

    Work as Moral Protagonism: How Myth and Ideology Animate a Brand-Mediated

    Moral Conflict." *Journal of Consumer Research* 36(6): 1016-1032.

Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. 2004 [1848]. *The Communist Manifesto*. London UK:

    Penguin Books.

Marx, Karl. 1990 [1867]. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume I.* Translated

    by B. Fowkes. London, UK: Penguin.

McGoey, Linsey. 2012. "Philanthrocapitalism and Its Critics." *Poetics* 40(2): 185-199.

Miller, Peter and Nikolas Rose. 1997. "Mobilizing the Consumer: Assembling the

    Subject of Consumption." *Theory, Culture and Society* 14:1-36.

Rose, Nikolas. 1999. *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*. Cambridge, UK:

    Cambridge University Press.

Soper, Kate. 2007. "Re-Thinking the 'Good Life': The Citizenship Dimension of

    Consumer Disaffection with Consumerism." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 7(2):

    205-229.

Tim Hortons. 2012. "Tim Hortons Coffee Partnership." Tim Hortons. Retrieved July 6,

    2012 (http://www.timhortons.com/ca/en/difference/coffee-partnership.html).

Weber, Max. 2007 [1978]. "Classes, Status Groups and Parties." *Weber: Selections in*

    *translation*. Edited by W. G. Runciman. Translated by E. Matthews. New York,

    NY: Cambridge University Press.

West, Paige. 2012. *From Modern Production to Imagined Primitive: The Social World of Coffee from Papua New Guinea*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Žižek, Slavoj. 2006. *How to Read Lacan*. London, UK: Granta Books.

Žižek, Slavoj. 2008. *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. New York, NY: Picador.

Žižek, Slavoj. 2008 [1989]. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London, UK: Verso

Žižek, Slavoj. 2009. *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*. London, UK: Verso.

Žižek, Slavoj. 2009. "RSA Animate – First as Tragedy, Then as Farce." Presented November 24, 2009. (http://youtu.be/hpAMbpQ8J7g).

Žižek, Slavoj. 2012. *Less Than Nothing.* London, UK: Verso.