

Agorism vs Ethical Consumerism

What's Worth Your Money?

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Utilizing markets to combat unethical business practices is a long tradition amongst activists from various ideologies. Whereas agorism seeks to combat cronyist practices of utilizing corporate welfare, tax breaks, lobbying, intellectual property laws, and other special government granted privileges to maintain economic status and even monopoly over certain products or ideas as well as other bad business practices by shifting more and more of our activity to agorist or free black and grey markets, ethical consumerism, on the other hand, seeks to combat unjust business practices by being conscious consumers on the white market, utilizing tactics of boycotting and buycotting.

Ethical consumerism is what's traditionally known as voting with your money within the mainstream economy. It's simply the idea of buying products and services that one deems ethical and not buying those one views as unethical in order to promote ethical market activity through demand. Don't like Monsanto? Don't buy food products supplied by them. Don't like Chick-fil-A because of your stance on gay rights? Don't buy from them. This is a tactic as old as markets themselves. However it fails to take into account multiple external factors which make this tactic wildly ineffective on a large scale.

In a truly freed market, ethical consumerism makes total sense but sadly our economy is anything but a freed market. Our market is so skewed in favor of certain actors that it is hard to effectively wage such battles against them on a large enough scale to affect them substantially. Poverty and unjust wealth distribution make it nearly impossible for some to survive as "ethical" consumers as the cost of such products tends to be much higher priced. Thus poorer consumers are forced to buy unethically produced lower-cost items out of necessity. Poorer consumers have a difficult enough time utilizing the democratic potential of markets as is, let alone in ethically sound ways. Therefore ethical consumerism becomes a basis for shifting the blame from unethical corporations to unethical consumers and can lead to poor shaming.

Living in a hierarchical society where businesses are mostly structured top-down means that information is also dispersed asymmetrically. Because of this many of us are so far removed from the reality of the products we consume. This knowledge problem leads us as consumers to make unethical choices in what we buy out of ignorance and lack of information. Certification groups such as Fairtrade International have sprung up to help supplement our personal knowledge by supposedly making sure that companies adhere to strict ethical standards laid out by

each certification group in order to receive their seal of approval. However not only have some of these groups been discovered to be selling certifications without inspection, but have also been criticized for pushing western ethics onto other cultures where certain views on ethics may differ. Such non-western farmers and producers who wish to gain or maintain fair trade status are forced to adopt foreign ethical standards in order to maintain business, thus making the movement appear to be more of a form of ethical colonialism rather than an ethical system built on autonomy or freedom.

The reality of ethical consumerism is that it fails to fundamentally challenge the current capitalist economic system in any substantial way, instead opting to work within the system. As with most economic activity, capitalists usually find a way to incorporate and market movements like this in such forms as consumer trends, cause marketing, green capitalism, and other niche markets. Instead of freed markets where the consumer has more control we are instead left with false promises from Energy Star appliances, fair trade foods, and other “ethical” products that capitalism can be saved and made more ethical.

Agorism by contrast does not see the white market state economy as ethical at all and chooses not to work within it to the largest extent in ways that sabotage it or decentralize it further. It does not shame those for their white market purchases, their lack of economic voting power, or their “unethical” purchases. There are no gatekeeper organizations such as fair trade certifiers which keep producers from participating. Best of all, agorism is a tactic accessible to everyone to varying degrees.

Unlike ethical consumerism which paints everything in a very black and white fashion, agorists see their tactics working in stages. Thus it is not necessary to be steadfastly and unswervingly “ethical” by means of only participating in the black and grey markets to the exclusion of white markets. Instead individual agorists strive to move as much of their economic activity as possible to the underground economy while navigating survival in the real world. Even the poorest person with no real white market voting power can avoid paying taxes, work under the table, utilize alternative currencies or the cashless economy, sell drugs, start unlicensed businesses, etc. And whereas many in the early stages of the agorist movement will only carry out a few of their daily activities through the underground economy, as the black and grey markets grow and develop, they will become both safer and encompass more and more products and services thus allowing more people to participate with less cost both financially and safety-wise.

While it is important to factor in personal ethics when engaging in the underground economy lest it become a haven for cartels, violence, and other unjust practices, ethical consumption on the white market is at best ineffective and at worst impossible. While tactics such as boycotts do have some success, they are not exclusive to the philosophy of ethical consumerism. All in all agorism seems both more realistic and better equipped to significantly challenge our current capitalist economy from the outside. Remember that there is no such thing as ethical consumerism under capitalism and the state market!

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