"LONGING FOR THE WEST": THE GEO-SYMBOLICS OF THE ETHICAL CONSUMPTION DISCOURSE IN HUNGARY

Tamás Dombos

ABSTRACT

Building on an ethnographic study of ethical consumption discourses and practices among activists and entrepreneurs in Hungary this chapter looks at how actors reflect critically on the current state of the Hungarian society by contrasting it to an image of Western Europe as a locus of consumer consciousness, civic activism, and sustainable economic practices. Such an opposition allows for the expression of various hopes, desires, and frustrations about the seemingly never ending process of post-socialist transition and at once provide a chance to mediate the contradictions inherent in contemporary practices of ethical consumption. While ethical consumption might offer itself as a global phenomenon, it is always practiced in local contexts with their particular struggles, histories, and trajectories. This chapter tries to contribute to the literature on ethical consumption by tracing the various meanings and values that are being attached to it in a "newly born consumer society."
Although the recent explosion in discourses and practices of ethical consumption so prominent in contemporary consumer societies is slowly starting to gain academic attention, anthropologists have not been at the forefront of this emerging new field of study. What is painfully missing from existing studies of ethical consumption is a closer investigation of how a seemingly clear notion of ethical consumption turns out to be much more complicated upon looking at its actual operation in concrete local contexts. This chapter uses the case of contemporary post-socialist Hungary to illustrate this point and argues that in this particular context ethical consumption is just as much about becoming Western, as it is about protecting the environment, complying with labor standards or helping the developing world.

Theoretically this chapter starts from the argument that commodities that travel from one social context to another acquire new layers of meaning as a result of this process of geographical movement. Following Appadurai's and Kopytoff's seminal pieces in the volume The Social Life of Things published in 1986 a growing number of social scientists and especially anthropologists took on the task of mapping and exploring the circulation of commodities between different social contexts – or as Appadurai put it between different "regimes of value" (pp. 14–15). As Foster (2006, p. 285) in his engaging review of this now vast amount of literature nicely summarizes it, these researchers "trace the social relations and material linkages that this movement creates and within which the value of commodities emerges."

Despite the richness of this approach Graeber (2001) is right in pointing out that the connection between movement and value is far from being clearly explicated. Although this chapter cannot undertake the task of coming up with a general solution to this problem, it does draw attention to one possible way in which the value of a commodity is directly linked to its circulatory past: value can be the result of a person's normative identification with the (imagined) source of the object. And the emphasis is on imagination here, for source, rather than being objectively given, is constructed through the myriad of processes that affiliate a commodity to a geographical location or a group of people.

The consumption of Western goods can and has been understood within this theoretical context (see, e.g., Carrier, 1995; Orlove, 1997; Stearns, 2001) and this argument is also present in the now growing literature on consumption in socialist Eastern and Central Europe. Historically minded sociologists and anthropologists in the 1990s argued that the widespread claim that consumption was secondary to production under socialism – attributed to Kornai's (1992) highly influential book – is too schematic, and
that although the claim might be true for the Stalinist era, it does not hold for the period starting from the 1960s, when the legitimacy of the communist system came primarily from the promise to provide people with a better standard of living than in the capitalist West (Röna-Tas, 1997, p. 85; Stearns, 2001, pp. 80–81; Vörös, 1997). Verdery argues that the double tendency of promising material well-being but being unable to deliver it created a social milieu, in which consumption itself became an oppositional strategy against the regime: “the arousal and frustration of consumer desire and East Europeans’ consequent resistance to their regimes led them to build their social identities specifically through consuming. Acquiring consumption goods and objects conferred an identity that set one off from socialism. To acquire objects became a way of constituting your selfhood against a regime you despised” (Verdery, 1992, pp. 25–26). Merkel (1998) follows this logic when she makes the point that part of the reason for the fall of communism was this permanent discontent resulting from the growing number of occasions that Easterners were able to compare their consumption patterns to Western standards of living.

Further research of socialist consumption (Hammer & Desewffy, 1997 and the special issue of Cultural Studies (2002) on shopping tourism under socialism) shows that the purchase and public display of goods of Western origin were accentuated versions of this practice of resistance. As Fehérváry (2002, p. 385) puts it: “such western commodities became displaced metonyms of another world, as the opposition between the state-socialist system and the capitalist system became embodied in their products.” The change of the system in 1989, however, brought spectacular changes not only in the political and economic life of Eastern Europeans, but also transformed what, how, and where they consumed. Goods of Western origin became widely available and the question was no longer how to distinguish oneself through the consumption of Western goods, but how to “normalize” their presence (see Fehérváry, 2002; Rausing, 2002). As a result of this normalization, commodities gradually lost their symbolic status as signifiers of a desired Western way of life.

This chapter shows how this process of symbolic dilution is partly impeded by the introduction of a new cluster of goods with markedly Western connotations. At the center of its interest are the practices of production, distribution, and promotion that construct ethically loaded products as “Western.” The chapter is divided into two sections. The first one familiarizes the reader with the immediate context of my research and contains a short introduction to the history of two typical forms of ethical consumption – the organic and the fair-trade movement – in the Hungarian
context. The second one analyzes the structural necessities and strategic practices that associate ethically loaded commodities with Westernness. The chapter ends by discussing how this discourse of ethical consumption is embedded within the overarching discourses of post-socialist transition.

THE CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

The research underlying this chapter is my ongoing Ph.D. project entitled *Ethical Consumption in Hungary: Discourse and Practice*. This ethnographic study using methods of participant observation, in-depth interviews, and discourse analysis investigates how different actors in the field co-construct the market as a politicized space. The research uses case studies to bring together various types of actors – entrepreneurs, activist, and consumers – under one frame of analysis. The three cases – the daily operation of an organic food store, the introduction of fair-trade products to the market, and collective branding of locally produced goods – reflect the diversity of ethical considerations and ideological positions present in the discussions about ethical consumption, as well as show different levels of embeddedness in the Hungarian context. For reasons of space and clarity of the argument, in this chapter I will focus on the first two of these cases, on organic consumption and the fair-trade movement.

Before entering into the discussion of the ethnographic material, some theoretical clarifications have to be made. First, I propose to conceptualize ethical consumption in a relational manner that builds on actors’ differentiation between socially detrimental and socially beneficial forms of consumption. As opposed to an objectivist definition, which assumes a social consensus on what is ethical and what is not, and categorizes acts of consumption based on this substantive conception of the good, the relational approach recognizes the plurality of often contradicting ethical norms that might guide consumption practices, but also recognizes ethical consumption as a particular social phenomenon, the particularity of which is that in case of ethical consumption actors make a link between individual consumer choice and its social consequences. Second, a distinctive feature of contemporary forms of ethical consumption is that its ethicality no longer depends solely on the consumer who has to behave in a certain way to be considered ethical, but there emerges a new cluster of goods and services that is invested with the meaning of being ethical; ethical consumption is increasingly identified with the consumption of this particular cluster of goods (which I will refer to as “ethically loaded commodities”), rather then
with forms of behaviors such as temperance, informed decision making, or charity giving. It is the production (not only material, but also symbolic) of this category of ethically loaded commodities that makes the study of actors beyond consumers so crucial. Third, much of the existing literature on the issue is trapped in the fruitless theoretical debate on whether ethical consumption is “viable” and/or “truly transformative,” a feature resulting most likely from the activist orientation of most of the researchers publishing on the topic and the reactions these “semi-academic” contributions provoke from others. What Miller writes about the academic treatment of consumption in general seems to hold particularly true for this segment of academia: “the central role taken by morality within consumption research...has led this branch of studies [to become] largely a site where academics can demonstrate their stance towards the world, rather than a place where the world stands as a potential empirical critique of our assumptions about it” (Miller, 2001, p. 226). This insight warns us that what is needed is not jumping to fast conclusions about whether ethical consumption works or not or whether its proponents are motivated by authentic concerns or other factors, but rather a detailed empirical analysis of how it operates in particular socio-historical contexts.

A Short History of the Organic Movement in Hungary

Although the organic movement (bearing the name “bio-” in Hungarian) dates back to the early 1980s in Hungary, in the first decade it was limited to a small number of farmers interested in organic agriculture centered on the club/association Biokultúra (Bioculture) founded in 1983. In terms of farming, the breakthrough came with the change of the system in 1989, when the rapid demise of the socialist agricultural system meant that the newly-independent farmers had to reorientate their economic practices: organic agriculture seemed an appealing alternative to a growing number of producers. However, until the end of the 1990s – with the exception of a few specialized shops in remote parts of Budapest – these organic products were not available on the Hungarian market, but were produced exclusively for export, predominantly to Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and the Netherlands (OszK6, 2002, p. 56).

The growing importance of organic agriculture resulted in increased institutionalization of it. Authorized inspection agencies were set up, a governmental decree regulating the production and labeling of organic products was passed in 1999, the National Agro-environmental Program.
aim of the workshop was to prepare for the introduction of fair-trade products to the Hungarian market by drawing on the experiences of Western colleagues. To the surprise of Hungarian activists, most of the Western fair-trade gurus – rather then being social activists of the usual kind – arrived wearing suits and ties, and talked about business strategy, market positioning, and financial plans. Upon the suggestion of the Westerners, the Hungarian activists compiled detailed action plans with different time frames (one to be completed in 3 months, another in a year, and two others in 2 and 5 years’ time, respectively) and practical and theoretical goals. Based on the action plan various strategy documents (communication strategy, volunteer management strategy) were adopted, a multi-step market research was planned and executed, an umbrella organization of interested NGOs was set up to coordinate the tasks, and the NGOs initiated an intensive call for volunteers among their members and associates. Although the official documents aimed at opening an online store within a year and a regular one in two, based on personal talks with activists at the time, I can say that they had actually hoped to be able to open the first Fair-Trade Shop within 4 months.

Meanwhile, the temporary Fair-Trade Café was turned into a Mobile Fair-Trade Café that has been traveling from festival to festival and participating at all major “protest events” for the last two years. The Café, which is operated by volunteers and financed by the NGOs and offerings collected in a box next to the coffee counter, gives away fair-trade coffee and tea for free, accompanied with fair-trade sugar and organic milk, all combined with an intensive promotion campaign of brochures and personal persuasion.

The market research suggested by the Western experts, commissioned and financed by an independent ecological foundation and implemented by a professional market research agency was completed during the summer months of 2005. Although the results were “devastating” for the movement—“We have to conclude that based on the segmentation [of quantitative data] the consumer group that would be the ideal target group for the introduction of fair trade is not detectable in any measurable quantity” (Capital Research, 2005, p. 70)—the NGOs decided to get media attention by publicizing the results of the research. The idea worked; most national daily and weekly newspapers bought the story. In these articles, the study that was originally meant to convince entrepreneurs that there is a market demand for fair trade—and to answer the question of to whom, and through which retailing channels, to sell fair-trade products—was re-contextualized as a study showing the disastrous condition of the Hungarian consumer.
society, where people are not receptive to the idea of ethical consumption and are not “mature” enough to appropriate the ideas that so successfully captivated the imagination of contemporary consumers in the West.

Media reports on the fair-trade study fit well in a series of similar newspaper articles that have appeared in recent years in various sections of the Hungarian media discussing phenomena linked to ethical consumption. These journalistic accounts follow a well-established script: (1) they contrast the image of the “modern,” “progressive,” “concerned” societies of the West with the “poor,” “parochial,” and “self-centered” Hungarian society; and (2) they explain the differences in the socio-cultural dispositions of Hungarians and Westerners by the country’s poorness and backwardness. The title of one of the articles on the fair-trade study sums up the argument very well: “Fair Trade is Still a Luxury for Us.” The term “luxury” implies both being unaffordable as well as being redundant. Another regular feature of these articles is to give voice to activists, who contrast their high enthusiasm and restless heroism with the “true Hungarian reality”: a gloomy picture of Hungarian consumers, at best indifferent or even hostile to the idea of ethical consumption.

Partly due to the disheartening results of the market research, the lack of expertise, and the quitting of activists most committed to the idea of the movement operating a store of its own, the priority of opening a store was abandoned in favor of awareness-raising and convincing already existing wholesale and retail businesses to carry fair-trade products in their profiles. To the surprise of activists, a small café in downtown Budapest close to a large office building had already been offering fair-trade coffee for a year and a half, although without any publicity surrounding its “fairness.” (If anything, the café was actually carving out its niche by emphasizing its Finnishness.) The strategy to mediate between foreign distributors and wholesalers and retailers worked well; by the end of 2005 fair-trade products had appeared on the shelves of some selected organic food stores (although only partly as a result of the NGO activism – some stores simply started placing the products on their shelves because the organic brand they had been carrying before came out in fair-trade version as well). In addition, an upscale Budapest supermarket chain also started selling fair-trade coffee and tea in its organic sections, and the first café (and English language secondhand bookshop) to emphasize its fair-trade affiliation opened in the spring of 2006.

The priority of the movement, however, clearly shifted to public awareness raising and education. Part of the reason for this was the growing discomfort of some of the activists about getting too involved in
business activities and being associated with profit motives. The education program developed by the NGOs focused on secondary education and universities. A colorful, professional-looking brochure aiming at high school students was compiled and information about introducing fair-trade education to school curricula was sent to all schools. Meanwhile, activists joined several international campaigns (White Band Day to mark the UN summit on global development, Red Card campaign against child labor, International Fair-Trade Day, IFAT Global Journey campaign, etc.), and by this time they had no problems receiving media attention: the events were covered in the largest newspapers, were discussed several times in the prime time live cultural entertainment program of Hungarian public television and activists were invited for interviews on various programs aiming at economic actors. The biggest media response surrounded the press release by the Office of the President of the Hungarian Republic, in which it was announced that from fall 2005 onward the Office would only serve fair-trade coffee and tea to its employees and guests.

The most recent development was the opening of the first fair-trade-only world shop in Hungary. Located 3 min away from the capital’s fanciest shopping street in a commercial space that used to be occupied by the only American Express office in Budapest, two young entrepreneurs who were unaffiliated with the activist movement before, opened their store in November 2006. The store sells a great variety of fair-trade goods: handicrafts, ornaments, clothes, and foodstuffs. The products are imported exclusively from a fair-trade corporation in Austria. The store is operating as a limited liability company connected with a foundation, which in the long run is planning to reinvest part of the store’s profits in third world development projects and which currently works as a promotional tool for fair-trade sensibilities. Due to the novelty of fair-trade products on the Hungarian market and the limited number of people and organizations affiliated with it, I am able to incorporate in my research all channels of distribution and actors involved in the movement.

ETHICALLY LOADED COMMODITIES AS EMBLEMS OF WESTERNNESS

In this section I would like to focus on the various aspects of the fair-trade and organic movement that contributes to its image as foreign/Western. Rather then seeing this process as solely a strategic activity on behalf of the actors involved (some of the factors clearly arise from the biographical
background of actors involved or the structural limitations of the Hungarian market) or a pure misapprehension of facts by the general public (there is a clear factual basis to this idea of foreignness), I would argue that a variety of factors contribute the construction of these ethically loaded commodities as emblematic signifiers of a particular notion of the West. During the analysis I will use the term “import” to refer to a set of practices related to the influx of various kinds of entities (people, commodities, images, procedures, norms, organizational structures, know-how, and communication tools) that are marked by their foreign origin.

Importing People

First, a remarkable number of people affiliated with the two forms of ethical consumption movement are of foreign origin or have spent a substantial part of their lives in a foreign country. David, the owner and manager of the first markedly Fair-Trade Café and bookshop, is American – although he has been living in Hungary for more than a decade. Tiffany, who first started to work on the issue of fair trade within one of the NGOs (but who has since moved on to other topics within the same NGO) is also from the US. Michael, the founder and leader of the model farm responsible for initiating the delivery service, is from the UK and according to their website prefers to be called “the Crazy Englishman.” András and his wife, current operators of the delivery service, talk about their life in the Netherlands as seminal in their identity as organic farmers. Mária has a Finnish life partner, and attributes much of her choice of a Finnish coffee supplier and her success in obtaining unprecedented contractual terms with them by her family links to Finland. Pál, one of the two entrepreneurs who opened the world shop, dropped out of school to start a decadelong journey in Western Europe and Latin-America. Renáta and Krisztiina, two among the most enduring activists/volunteers around the fair-trade movement both lived and studied abroad, this is where they met with the fair-trade movement for the first time.

Not only is it the fact that these people happen to be of foreign origin or spent time abroad, but they publicly affirm this information linking their personalities to their activities. Take for example the following extract from an interview published on a website about cafés in Budapest:

He introduces himself as Stein David, but his accent gives him away at once... David is from the American state of Maine, and came to Hungary 16 years ago together with the wave of missionaries, democracy-promoting liberals and ecological activists... The
owner of the shop offering English language books and organic fair trade coffee proudly
tells the story how he opened the first Greenpeace office in Hungary.

András does the same: when describing the history of the farm on his
website, he proudly claims to have moved to a farm in the Netherlands with
his whole family before switching his farm to organic. The way the parts of
personal biographies linked to abroad have been made public results in
consumers associating these businesses and organizations with their
"foreign" operators.

Importing Knowledge

I have not met one activist or entrepreneur who was not keen on "learning
from the experience of the West." Fair-trade activists equate the takeoff of
the movement with a workshop featuring the participation of some 13
experts of fair trade from organizations such as the Finnish world shop
Uusivaihde, the Belgium Branch of Civil International, FLO, Worldshops
Germany (NEWS), Green Liberty, Fairtrade Austria, etc. They describe the
occasion as having been "extremely helpful," "eye-opening," "stopping us
from making huge mistakes," and emphasize the very different and
professional approach the guests showed to them. The World Shop was
also conceived and practically put into motion in Vienna. It was a relative
living in Austria who proposed that the two young entrepreneurs move into
fair trade. The "Austrian connection" was important in the actual start-up
of the enterprise as well. Pál and Csongor first turned to Fairtrade Austria
for preliminary advice and networks. They were forwarded to the major
Austrian fair-trade distributor. Pál recounts their first visit to the company
in the following way.

They were very very enthusiastic and open. We haven't felt for a second that they were
against us - they supported us in every way. By support I mean moral support, but also
advice... [We have received] plenty of positive advice from them... They have 30 years of
experience, they have three world shops in Austria. They had the experience. What
products, where, to which shelf - details like that. They also instructed us to rent an open
space of 50-60 sq.m., with a large window, at a frequented spot.

András also talks about how much he learnt from his Dutch experience
and how important it is to keep in touch with current trends in the West.

We arrived, and looked around and saw that it [organic farming] works, they produce
everything without chemicals... We could bring home technologies [we thought]. Most
importantly, we talked with them every night, to the extent that we could, about how
they do this in practice, what special tools unknown in Hungary exist to realize this. We learnt about Rudolf Steiner\# there, the ideas behind it all... The whole idea of the box, for example, was based on what this Dutch friend of ours who worked in the UK as a consultant saw there. He did this same boxing system there, because it is very widespread there. So the box itself – its design – was brought here and suggested to Michael by my husband. It can be opened and closed, reused... At the time we saw this in England, we didn’t know we would wind up using it. But in the end we implemented this idea coming from the UK here in Hungary.

It is not only practical knowledge like the examples above that is imported. Much of the NGO’s activity is centered on making documents in foreign languages available in Hungarian, and there is a special translation working group within the volunteer network. Materials put together by activists (brochures, flyers, educational material) very infrequently carry a strong notion of authorship; they are translations, compilations that reproduce text prepared abroad always with a clear reference to their source. Beside understandable concerns for intellectual property rights, these complimentary notes and attributions of authorship send the message that what one reads is foreign knowledge, which is available out there, and only needs to be brought home.

Importing Products

The factors mentioned above, however, contribute only indirectly to the "Westernization" of ethically loaded commodities in the eyes of consumers, since such information is only partially available publicly and only at the disposition of the actors involved. Far more important is the fact that the majority of products are relayed through the "West" in their commodity chain. At this point, the two stories separate, we will first follow fair-trade products then organic ones.

At first sight, fair-trade products inspire geographical associations linked to the Third World. In the official slogan of the movement “Fairtrade – Guarantees a better deal for Third World producers” the link is explicitly made, but not much more difficult to decode is the imagery of smiling dark-colored coffee growers or beautiful landscapes of Central America. But equally hard to miss is an added layer of origin, that of the West. Fair-trade products available in Hungary – without exception – come to the country through Western European packaging and distribution. This is completely understandable, since the Hungarian market is not large enough to provide for a separate distributor/wholesaler. This is an economic reality, the rationality of which is hard to question. Anyhow, this structural necessity
creates far-reaching symbolic consequences. Let’s trace what signs of “Westernness” an average pack of fair-trade coffee bears on itself. First there is the Fair-trade logo, containing the text “fair-trade” in the English language. Although the NGOs struggle hard to always use the complicated Hungarian equivalent (mélányos kereskedelmi) in public appearances, the two terms are always used together, performing the act of translation itself, the need to domesticate something foreign, rather than using the Hungarian term without any further specification. The rationality of this practice is unquestionable; it is an established “brand name” simple enough to be understood by any Hungarian even without extensive knowledge of the English language. Still the “alienating” effect is undeniable.

Then there is the brand name. Clipper and Cafédirect are neutral enough to not signal any kind of national imagery, but English enough to signal something Western. Then there is the whole range of information available on the packaging (country of origin, ingredients, best before, etc.) not to forget the compulsory – sometimes surprisingly text intensive – “producer story” that became the de facto international standard of fair-trade packaging. Of course state regulations prescribe that every important piece of information be available in Hungarian translation on the product itself, which is usually achieved by adding a white sticker with the information in plain print, adding the same “performing translation” dynamic mentioned above in relation to the term fair trade itself. We also cannot forget about how a certain national character is added on top of fair trade as a promotional tool. Mária’s coffee is proudly Finnish; David’s coffee is award-winningly Italian.

Although similar in its symbolism, the foreignness of organic products, is much more complicated on the practical level and is also partly historic. As mentioned earlier in the historical introduction, production of organic food in Hungary antedated its general availability for Hungarian consumers. Júlia, the owner of the first shop selling organic vegetables, recounts her personal experience of problems she faced when she tried going organic in 1990.

In 1990 there were no organic vegetables or fruits available, although they were produced. Since the Biokultúra Association had been in operation since 1986. It was a regulated, accredited organization accepted in the whole of Europe, but you could not get organic produce in Hungary. Wholesalers got their hands on it all, and exported it for good money... I had big fights with wholesalers – they were convinced these things could not be sold here.

Part of the reason why producers never became interested in selling on the Hungarian market was the unlimited demand abroad for organic products.
Producers and wholesalers entered into commodity networks that were able to absorb whatever was produced, without the need to look for new markets. These established networks provided comfort and security the producer were not willing to risk by entering the Hungarian market. Another fear was that they would not be able to charge the same price for their products, a fear not only supported by the economic realities of Hungarian consumers, but also by a moral economy that would have made such levels of extra profit illegitimate when reached at the price of “fellow countrymen.”

But market demand grew and even if it was just a small niche, it was big enough for some entrepreneurs to open shops of their own. And where to get the products? Organic food networks in Western Europe were willing to sell whatever was asked for. So these early organic food stores ended up importing products that might have been produced by Hungarian farmers, exported to the West, and undergoing minor or major processing (minor most of the time – processed food is relatively infrequent among organic food compared to that of the mainstream), but most often only packaging. The items then reappeared in their foreign packaging on the shelves of Hungarian stores. Although such commodity loops are largely features of the past (their overall economic rationality being close to zero and still the result of rational calculus on behalf of all actors involved), these early years of organic consumption have far-reaching consequences: in the eyes of the average consumer organic shops are places where one finds imported goods for exorbitant prices.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I explored how the production, distribution, and promotion of ethically loaded commodities become tools for some entrepreneurs and activists in Hungary to experience day-by-day their identification with the West. Rather than being limited to a small number of involved actors, this identification has far-reaching consequences: it establishes a strong symbolic linkage between ethically loaded products and Westernness among the general public. By capitalizing on the existing desire for a Western way of life this linkage can be instrumentally used as a marketing tool for ethically loaded products, similar to how nostalgia for an authentic life is invoked in alternative food movements (see Pratt, this volume), or the image of the small family producer is utilized in advertisements for fair-trade coffee (see Luetichford, this volume). Advertisements do play an important role in
offering a repertoire of meanings based on which consumer identifications are built upon. But that is not all. In a world of consumption where Western goods are indistinguishably mingled with the ones produced locally or imported from other parts of the world (most importantly, Asia), ethically loaded commodities due to their novelty and low availability are able to materialize a sentiment of longing for the West among Hungarian consumers that no other group of products can. Fogetting about this dynamic of longing would be just as problematic as denying the role that marketing plays in providing the interface for connecting desires and commodities by investing products with symbolic meanings.

The chapter has also shown how the linkage between ethical consumption and Westernness is reinforced by the fact that the majority of ethically loaded commodities are relayed through the “West” in their commodity chains - either coming to Hungary from third world countries through a Western intermediary or being looped through the West by exporting and then re-importing. This movement attaches an added layer of meaning and value to these commodities; the value being the result of a normative identification with the imagined “source” of the commodity: the West. This ideological identification is built on a normatively charged opposition between East and West, a disposition described by Antohi (2001) and also Meleghi (2003) as “internalized Orientalism” or “Occidentalism.” It is through this disposition that discourses of ethical consumption become embedded in the overarching discourse of “post-socialism” and “transition.” While the social scientific relevance of these terms can be questioned (see the debate in Hann, 2001), the incompleteness of the “post-socialist transition” is still an ever-present colloquial topos ordering popular knowledge about contemporary social processes. The transition appears as a long journey with both a spatial and a temporal dimension, the spatial being the process of reintegration into Europe, the temporal a permanent feeling of lagging behind. The public discussions on ethical consumption are embedded in this powerful discourse of desire and shame.

Part of the reason why the East-West opposition is so prevalent is that “the West” is an empty-enough signifier to be filled up with quite wide-ranging normative anxieties. Sure it is about being “Western,” “European,” and “Modern,” but as to what exactly it is that these notions refer to is much less clear, even if limiting the scope of the inquiry to the question of ethical consumption. Some interviewees saw the “West” as a locus of rational modesty as opposed to the irrationality of consumerism in the East, while others talked about the “West” as the triumph of ethicality and emotions as opposed to the cold rational self-interested calculus of the
Easterners. For some it symbolizes transnational solidarity, for others unashamed patriotism. There were people who emphasized the wide range of products and brands to choose from, while others focused on the presence of clear and observed state regulations. The inconsistencies of these various notions linked to Western consumption mirror the ambivalences that are present in ethical consumption discourses in general.

By placing ethical consumption within the existing frame of reference that is built on the identification of material well-being with the West, the two become inextricably linked: the desire to consume ethically becomes embedded in the quest for material well-being, while the desire for material well-being is legitimized by the higher level of ethicality it enables. The way the classic opposition between the push for material well-being and its limitations by ethical and environmental considerations so widespread in contemporary discussion of ethical consumption is overwritten by an apparent harmony of the two claims, shows the extent to which the local contexts tame and transform a seemingly global phenomenon.

NOTES

1. The organic food store database operated by the Association of Conscious Consumers contains 227 shops.
2. The market research agency GfK Hungária publishes the main findings of its corporate-commissioned research activities on its website (http://www.gfk.hu).
3. PHARE is one of the pre-accession donor programs set up by the European Union to support countries in the region to prepare for joining the European Union.
4. The founding partners include an influential NGO active in ecological, international trade and sustainability issues. This particular NGO was able to make prime time news for months by protesting against the placement of a military locator – a NATO radar – on top of picturesque Mt. Zengő, and by convincing political parties to support their “outsider” candidate for the position of the President of the Republic. The founding partners also include a semi-political green youth organization, and two associations/foundations that assist people in going abroad as voluntary workers.
5. These protest events include local actions against particular investment projects, as well as Hungarian versions of international initiatives, like the Living Peace sign demonstration or the Critical Mass bicycle demonstration (drawing some 30,000 bikers in the fall of 2006.)
6. All names used in the chapter are pseudonyms.
7. First and family names come in opposite order in the Hungarian language, by using the Hungarian order, he plays with his foreignness/Hungarianess.
8. Steiner (1861–1925) is an Austrian philosopher born in Hungary who is considered one of the intellectual founding fathers of the organic movement. Although he wrote in German, he had a strong group of Hungarian followers in his
time, but was then completely forgotten in Hungary until his recent rediscovery in the early 1990s. Being a reimported local, his story mirrors the journey of products described in the next section.

REFERENCES


