WHY “BUYCOTTING”? 
The reasons behind fair-trade consumption acts in Italy

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Workshop 5: Studying Forms of Participation
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1. Introduction

Several scholars have pointed out political consumerism as a relevant emerging form of political expression, which testifies to a diversification in citizens’ political involvement and the transformations which are taking place in the participation modes.

According to the workshop proposal, the general questions used for studying political participation and the evolution of its repertories are the following: “How?” (the modes and forms), “Who?” (the actors involved), “Toward whom?” (the target), “So what?” (the effects) and “Why?” (the motivations).

The specific aim of this work is to explore this last question. This paper focuses on studying the reasons behind the buycotting choice, though the other matters mentioned above – modes, actors, targets, and so on – will be necessarily touched upon in the next pages.

From our point of view, it would be very interesting to concentrate the study mainly on the reasons which lay behind a responsibility taking choice like fair-trade buying. Buycotting, in fact, is labelled as an emerging mode of participation action and falls into the positive political consumerism form as reported in the literature [Micheletti 2003]. Then, trying to understand at the individual level the reasons associated with this consumption behaviour is a way of looking at how – albeit specific and limited – a part of the Italian citizens interpret politics, and how the involvement with community matters is changing.

Society and politics

The frame which contains this social approach to politics refers essentially to the global level. Contemporary democracies, in fact, are living an intense change in the relationship between society and politics. Traditional political actors such as parties, unions, and structured and formal organisations, are progressively more detached from society. The membership decline is a manifest indicator of this process.

People become more progressively disassociated from the politics, or it is better to say from the traditional models of political involvement [Norris 2002]. Citizens are distasteful about political life, and social creativity seems to identify new arenas - like the market – and new expressions – like the “shopping bag power” – to influence international economy and politics and to communicate a critical message towards the main social, economic and, of course, political actors in the global scenario. But this practice, in other words, is political side-taking.

In the past, structures like parties or unions were able to give not just opportunities but also sense to people who used to get involved in politics by means of these structures. It was in fact a meaningful way of living and doing politics in order to be engaged in public matters.

The party democracy, according to Bernard Manin’s [1997] theory, was a form of representative government which implied the centrality of the traditional and conventional
forms of participation and the relevant role of the structured organizations. This scenario implies features such as a high level of party identification, a lower electoral volatility, a higher electoral participation and party membership.

In addition, a strong relation between territory and politics is another important characteristic to mention. It witnesses a landscape where participation was based on a "collectivistic collective action", and where the delegation of responsibility from citizens to the representative democratic structures was a relevant praxis.

Nowadays, from a certain point of view, things are fairly changed. The French author mentioned above talks about the rise of a new form in the "metamorphoses" of the principles of the representative government: the *audience democracy*. Besides the media system, which has raised its role in the political scenario, there are other important transformations at the societal level within this new form of democracy. In particular, the increasing withdrawal and disengagement of citizens and voters from conventional politics and parties characterize such an *audience democracy*.

It does not mean that political parties, interest groups or trade unions themselves are no longer important actors in democratic processes. Parties, even *without partisans* [Dalton and Wattemberg 2000], still play an important role in the political system; albeit they have changed under different points of view. In particular from the organizational perspective, where the rise of the *cartel party* and "the ascendancy of party in public office" [Katz and Mair 2002] bares witness to the process of disengagement between people and politics; among parties, society and the territory.

Before the ideology crisis, parties were political actors and were able to give a strong feeling of identification. The Mass party model, thanks to its rooted social presence in the territory, was a concrete socialisation agency which allowed for occasions that involved citizens. Political parties used to mediate between politics and society, aggregating and articulating social demand, concerns, or at a minimum, they were concretely present socially in the citizens’ experience.

*New frame and new arenas*

This scenario has been changing, and next to these (transformed) bureaucratic structures a space for informal networks is growing. The Globalisation phenomenon, the crisis of the nation-state and its inadequacy in facing the new risks - such as ecological or food ones – and the individual uncertainty, typical condition of the post-modern age, characterise the socio-political scenario. The Global neo-liberism economy and the “social justice claim” compose the frame where new forms of political expressions take root.

Of course, these new modes are not exactly *new*. Boycotting or buycotting are historically known, having their own roots in the past. But the newer risk-society conditions render a particular attraction to these participatory expressions from the research interest perspective [Micheletti, Follesdal, Stolle, 2003].
An apposite example refers to the Internet, which is not just a symbol but also a tool for living in the global world; these informal networks develop also on the Net. Internet activism is strictly linked to these new forms of involvement.

The Internet is, at least, very important for quickly circulating information worldwide and for disclosure aim. Trans-national advocacy groups cannot develop or plan actions so easily and rapidly without the Internet as a tool.

Focusing on political consumerism, one could say that it is a kind of activism linked to the anti-globalisation movements in the public sphere. Such consumption behaviour has become more widespread over the last years. Those acts are used by citizens to express their political and moral concerns. And the market could be seen as a site of politics, an emerging subpolitical arena to cite Ulrich Beck’s category.

But these practices are also connected to individual responsibility-taking regarding social, environmental and ethical issues, in the private sphere and in day to day life. There is in the first place a personal concern about collective problems.

In fact, this form of involvement is related to a particular social network, which develops a sort of “do-it-yourself activism” – having recourse to an <<individualized collective action>> strategy [Micheletti 2003] – and it recalls the idea of the citizens’ action in the subpolitical arenas [Beck 1997].

The issues which seem to stimulate the repertoire of this new style of participation - in its different modes, positive, negative or discursive [Micheletti 2003] - are relevant to globalisation processes, such as the sustainable development, the current role of multinational corporations and international organizations, the gap between rich and poor countries, the respect of social justice and labour rights, food risk, and so on.

Moreover, these wide-ranging preconditions which refer to the change of the landscape – citizens’ disembeddedness from conventional politics, worries about the negative side effects of globalisation, the individualisation process where (political) identities become increasingly reflexive – are strictly linked to the individual motivation which lay behind political participation choice.

Finally, on one hand there is an ongoing structural changing which affects the scenario as a whole. On the other, personal reasons play a relevant role in the individual’s decision of how to participate. In order to understand the political consumerism phenomenon from its core, it is very interesting to deepen the motivations and the social representations concerning it.

The paper’s purpose

As already mentioned, we want to highlight the buycotters perspective. The analysis of the personal reasons which lay behind some particular consumption behaviours is the topic that we are trying to explore. Within the scenario outlined above, the market has emerged as an arena where citizens are able to play a (sub)political role. According to this interpretation, the aim of the paper is to expand upon the motivations of ethical buying. So
the basic question we want to answer is: “Why do some people buycott certain products, in this case fair-trade ones?”

Motivations, in fact, are particularly rich in individual and social representations and are central with respect to the general questions proposed for the workshop session. Then, taking into consideration what is hidden behind these choices of consumption, it would be very important in order to know more about this research problem. So it will be interesting to delve into the reasons behind such actions with different kinds of source data: in fact, quantitative and qualitative information will be used.¹

Is it merely the need of self-expression, or the intention to fulfil a wish to participate in a different way from the opportunities offered by the traditional organisational structures. Are there other motivations, like religious ones for example?

Particularly in Italy this kind of connection is quite strong [Forno and Ceccarini 2006], fair-trade shops in fact are often linked to religious groups or kept by voluntary associations which operate in the Catholic Church orbit. It could be possible to find different reasons at different levels. In this regard, literature on citizens’ political involvement reports that important phenomena have influenced the relationship between politics and society during the last few decades.

The weakening of the ideologies, the consequent crises of the traditional ways in which people get involved in politics are just some. In parallel, the increasing role of the media system and the new technologies used for communication in the political arena, the rise of new (or renewed) social and political demands and sensibilities are reshaping the way people approach politics; how political involvement is lived from the point of view of an individual’s experiences. An added issue is the <<individualisation>> process. These are just some of the most important points which compose the frame of this story.

Moreover, at the same time, these forms of political involvement could be seen also as an interesting point of view for exploring political culture and its change, in a world where globalisation processes are progressively defining a common scenario for citizens.

How do people see, imagine and live politics, what are the most relevant meanings connected to these acts of consumption, who or what are the main targets of actions according to a buycotters’ political representation; these are the basic arguments to

¹ The paper is based on empirical evidences which are drawn from two main and different sources: a) about thirty qualitative interviews, to fair-trade consumers, performed outside some fair-trade shops, in three different cities belonging to three diverse Italian regions (Liguria, Marche and Emilia Romagna); b) a national survey on a representative sample of the Italian population (data: collected by means Cati methods, sample: n=1424, age: 15 and older, period: may 2004). This opinion poll was carried out from Demos-Coop in collaboration with LaPolis (Univ. of Urbino) for the 4th wave of the Observatory on Italians’ Social Capital. Director of the project Ilvo Diamanti that the author wish to thank for having allowed the use of the results of the survey.

investigate. And it is also important to approach the sense that participants associate with these initiatives of socio-economic solidarity, like boycotting acts.

Research questions and sources of data

This paper will be based on empirical evidences which are drawn from two main and different sources: a) qualitative interviews, to fair-trade consumers, performed outside various Italian fair-trade shops; b) a national survey on a representative sample of the Italian population. This opinion poll reported about 30% of Italians had bought fair-trade products, during the year before the interview. So this group will be analysed to deepen some relevant points. Specifically the paper - using and combining these different sources of data - aims to discuss basic aspects connected to the reasons why a part of the Italian people performs that consumption choice.

The basic intention is to give an answer to the following questions:

- Is fair-trade consumption so “politically” oriented from the consumers’ perspective?
- Are there other reasons, values, orientations, other than political involvement and protest which encourage boycotting acts? If so, which ones?
- What is politics for political consumers? How do they see and evaluate it?
- How are traditional political actors and actions seen by boycotters?
- Is there a relationship between other different (ethical) uses of money, like charitable donations, and buying fair-trade products?

In the end, the paper will define a sort of motivations profile, taking into consideration the elements which characterize the political culture of those who buy fair-trade products, trying to give “images” but also some “measures” of the phenomenon itself.

2. The “motivations” in the questionnaires

Political consumers consider the market as an important arena for political action. Scholars underline this point, and research evidences give this interpretation some important clues. Behind their behaviour there is the awareness that the actors involved in the market have a responsibility not just for economic development but also for the improvement of the social condition.

Hence non-economic values, such as ethical, social, environmental and of course political ones play an important role in choosing a product or a producer, then in carrying out consumption behaviour.

Usually these attitudes are taken in account in the survey questions. Researchers have tried to find indicators in order to measure this phenomenon [Colloca 2005].

As scholars have reported, political consumption is not a new phenomenon, and the social research before concentrating on the positive political consumerism - the so
called buycotting - addressed the attention toward the negative form of the political consumerism: the boycotting practices.

More recently, during the 90s, ethical consumption and critical forms of buying have drawn social and political scientists’ attention. The consequences of Globalisation and new social sensibility in relation to environmental issues or the difference between rich and poor countries, have led citizens to reinventing political activism [Norris 2002]. These actions are fuelled by new political and cultural attitudes. It is a typical example of “lifestyle politics” [Giddens 1991], where decisions and practices of everyday life take on a political significance.

It must be also said that not all scholars agree with the political meaning associated in an indiscriminate way with a particular consumption behaviour, as in the case of the organic food purchase. It could be seen also as a choice for healthy personal reasons.

The same could be said for household economizing practices; they could be performed just to reduce the household costs and not taking into consideration environmental problems, and so on.

In this regard, international survey programmes - such as European Social Survey, World Values Surveys, Citizenship Involvement and Democracy Survey etc. - have been used indicators on political consumption. Actually, in the beginning, the questionnaires included only the questions on the boycotting actions. Later, also buycotting has been taken into consideration [Colloca 2005]. In order to link relevant reasons – such as ethical, political, environmental or social ones – to the choice, researchers, most of the time, incorporated these motivations into the question wording itself.

The reasons behind the choice are very important to classify these consumption decisions, like political ones, in order to distinguish the political consumers among all citizens.

Some scholars have suggested taking into consideration – for validity reasons related to the concept measurement - not just the consumption acts itself, the behaviour, but another two different criteria to better define political consumerism [Stolle, Hooghe, Micheletti 2005]:

- the awareness and motivation, the actor involvement has to be based on sufficient knowledge and a political or social motivation, and not on the preference for the taste or a purchase by chance.

- another condition is the frequency and habit. To buy a product just once, for example, does not indicate the presence of a political consumption behaviour or a particular behavioural pattern.

This multidimensional conceptualisation of the political consumption takes into consideration both behavioural and attitudinal conditions, where motivations are basic elements. The operationalisation of this concept and the systematic use of it over the cross-national pieces of research will help to study the phenomenon in depth while also allowing comparison procedures. But this is not the situation at the moment.

Political consumption in Italy is not widely investigated. In particular looking at cross-national studies, Italy ranks quite low, compared to other European democracies [Ferrer-Fons 2004]. An important research which has studied this subject on the Italian
case was the quadrennial survey on Social Associationism, conducted by Iref (Rome). The last collection of data, the 8th edition, was performed in November 2002. Some results are presented on the general report [Caltabiano 2003], and a deepening use of these data is forthcoming next June in the review South European Politics and Society.

In that questionnaire there were a specific question on the motivations, posed to those who had performed at least one of the following consumption acts: fair-trade, ethical consumption, household economizing, and ethical tourism. Of course, there was extensive overlapping between the different acts carried out by consumers, where fair-trade consumption and ethical purchases were the most widely spread acts performed.

Regarding the motivations, the questionnaire included five different reasons such as:

1) “to avoid contributing to social injustices like the exploitation of child labour”;
2) “Belief that consumption also ought to have a social end”;
3) “to help organizations that work in this field”;
4) “to help developing countries”;
5) “to be interested in the quality of these products”.

For the respondent, it was possible to give two answers, the first and the second one, ranked by the relevance of the reason. Considering the first choice as the most important for respondents, 34% indicated the “social end” of the consumption, and 26% chose the reason related to the child labour exploitation [Forno and Ceccarini 2006].

Unfortunately there were not any explicit references to political reasons, or environmental ones. The first two motivations considered are in some way related to the ethical matter, but are not explicitly political.

The other two reasons, the third and the fourth included in the response alternative, had a meaning more close to solidarity purposes, as the word “help” recalls.

Finally, the last one, the fifth response alternative, is clearly a motivation which does not have any ethical, social or political meaning, since the consumption choice is performed on the strength of the quality of the products itself. It recalls the idea of the rational consumer.

The social reasons indicated by the respondents are probably interlaced in collective concerns and political side-taking. Moreover, also religious principles could have a role in such consumption decision. But also this reason was not explicitly reported.

3. A research on the Italian context

Regarding the reasons behind fair-trade consumption it is possible to get some evidences from the 4th wave of the Italians’ Social Capital Observatory (Demos-Coop / LaPolis-University of Urbino), carried out in May 2004.

In that occasion, the questions used regarding political consumption acts, like boycotting and buycotting had, as it is usually done, the motivations included in the

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2 This article, titled From the Street to the Shops: The Rise of New Forms of Political Actions in Italy [Forno and Ceccarini 2006, 197-222], is based on the paper (which had the same title) presented at the 2004 Ecpr Joint Sessions, Uppsala, Sweden.
wording. But for the question related to the fair-trade purchase the motivations were asked in a following, and then separate, question.

The questions used have the problem that the frequency and the habit to buy these products were not measured. But they allow the discussion of the reasons why a selected part of Italian citizens make this purchase decision (even though the response alternative could be formulated in a more articulated way).

Just to give some measures of the phenomenon (Table 1) the research reports that 30,1% of Italians had chosen to buy – during the 12 months preceding the survey - certain products considering ethical, political or environmental reasons.

The same percentage (30,6%) declared that they had bought some fair-trade products. As we will see in the paper, there is not a total overlap between these two types of consumers (and consumption).

To complete this basic information on consumption behaviour it must be said that nearly two out of ten Italians (18,7%) have boycotted certain products for the same reasons mentioned above: ethical, political or environmental.

Fair-trade is a very important phenomenon in Italy which has matured especially during '90. A great number of organizations - Catholic or left-wing oriented, and large-scale retail, such as Coop, Esselunga - deal with this kind of trade. They sell these particular products, trying to inform and give awareness to consumers on the “philosophy” of this specific form of business. What is interesting to underline from our point of view is the fact that not all the fair-trade consumers are what we call in this paper ethical consumers.³

Table 1 Over the last 12 months, have you …(Percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>DK/Refused</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...bought some fair-trade products* (i.e. food products or handicrafts whose proceeds will effectively go to poor countries producers)</td>
<td>30,6</td>
<td>68,4</td>
<td>1,0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1.424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…bought some products for ethical, political or environmental reasons</td>
<td>30,1</td>
<td>69,2</td>
<td>0,7</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1.424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…boycotted some products for ethical, political or environmental reasons</td>
<td>18,7</td>
<td>80,6</td>
<td>0,7</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1.424</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* To the respondents who had answered “Yes” it was also asked to indicate the reasons for this consumption choice (See figure 2 and Table 4).

Source: Demos-Coop / LaPolis (Univ. of Urbino), Observatory on Italians’ Social Capital (4th wave), May 2004.

³ We call ethical consumers the ones who “have bought some products for ethical, political or environmental reasons”, in order to distinguish them from the one who have bought fair-trade products (named fair-trade consumers).
In fact, looking at table 2, the data shown make it immediately clear that considering 100 fair-trade consumers, just 56 of them also carry out ethical consumption choices. This means that about half of them purchase only fair-trade products. They are “specialised” on this type of consumption.

A smaller number of them, 38, have also performed boycotting acts. Buying fair-trade products seems to be a sort of first step toward a political consumption condition. In fact, ethical consumers are more involved in boycotting (46 out 100), and the boycotters are the ones who in the larger part also perform both fair-trade and ethical consumption (61 and 74 respectively). We could say that boycotters are “more” political consumers than the others. In order to have an idea of how many actions, based on the three considered, Italian citizens carry out, figure 1 shows the following distribution:

- there is 53.2% of Italians which did not do any of the three consumption acts considered;
- Italians who performed just one of the three purchase choice are the 23.6%;
- two acts were carried out by 13.6% of citizens;
- the most involved in making these consumption decisions (all acts performed) are the 9.6%.

Looking at table 3, it is possible to see which kind of consumption choices citizens chose who performed one or two acts.

Within the first group, half of them (50.3%) declared that they had performed fair-trade consumption. A smaller percentage (38.1%) had chosen ethical consumption acts. The remaining 12.2% are the ones who had carried out boycotting action as the only one political consumption act.

This to say that fair-trade purchasing is widely spread because it is easier to practice it. It has also an higher visibility in the territory, and organizations which deal with it are able to mobilize people (also the ones less politicised). It is, in other words, a “less-cost” action for the customer. It requires a lower involvement, lower information and little competence. You do not need to read which producers to choose or to avoid. The fair-trade shop (or market stall) is itself a warranty. The social meaning of fair-trade business is easier to understand, especially for the one who does not have a high level of resources to spend in this area.

Moreover, fair-trade choice may not have the same political imprinting which critical consumption or the boycotting choice, in particular, have.

In fact an higher number of actions performed indicates a deeper political involvement of the citizens. The ones who had performed two acts, in comparison with those who carried out just one act, are also citizens that are relatively more involved in actions like ethical consumption or boycotting (Table 3). On this basis, we should expect that behind the fair-trade consumption choice there are not just political reasons, but there are also other relevant motivations.
Table 2 Every 100 citizens who, during the last year, have carried out…(Percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fair-trade consumption</th>
<th>Ethical consumption</th>
<th>Boycotting acts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fair-trade consumption</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>56,5</td>
<td>61,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical consumption</td>
<td>55,9</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>75,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boycotting acts</td>
<td>37,7</td>
<td>46,7</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Demos-Coop / LaPolis (Univ. of Urbino), Observatory on Italians’ Social Capital (4th wave), May 2004.

Figure 1 Number of political consumption acts carried out by Italian citizens during the 12 months preceding the survey (Percentage)

Source: Demos-Coop / LaPolis (Univ. of Urbino), Observatory on Italians’ Social Capital (4th wave), May 2004.
### Table 3

Citizens who have carried out political consumption acts, during the 12 months preceding the survey, by the number of acts performed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Just one act</th>
<th>Two acts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fair-trade consumption</td>
<td>50,3</td>
<td>68,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical consumption</td>
<td>38,1</td>
<td>86,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boycotting acts</td>
<td>12,2</td>
<td>46,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Demos-Coop / LaPolis (Univ. of Urbino), Observatory on Italians’ Social Capital (4th wave), May 2004.

### 4. Reasons behind fair-trade consumption

In order to investigate the key aspects of the motivation for fair-trade buying, the Italians’ Social Capital survey asked those who had declared to have bought fair-trade products, in the 12 months preceding the interview, the following question:

**Why did you buy fair-trade products?**

- Religious principles
- Political reasons
- Product taste and quality
- By chance

The question let the respondent give a maximum of two answers, ranked in order of relevance. Figure 2 shows the most important reason.

The highest percentage is the one linked to the religious principles, 32,1%. The second one refers to the interest in the quality and the taste of these products, which was indicated by 27,9% of the fair-trade products buyers.

Political reasons as a first motivation was declared by 22,8% of the total respondents. There is also a minority group (17,2%) which had bought fair-trade products by chance. Because they run into shop or into the market stall.

These evidences indicate that behind the fair-trade consumption choice there is a combination of different mindsets. Political reasons are important, but are not the most relevant; in fact, they rank third out of four.

Religious sense seems to have a very strong impact on this particular choice of boycotting (fair-trade consumption). It is easily explained by means of the Catholic groups which deals with these shops, or missionary projects linked to this trade. In any case, both
of these “ethical” motivations – political and religious ones - engage more than half of the total of fair-trade consumers (54,9%).

The remaining considerable part (45,1%) answered that they had chosen, in the first place, paying attention to other reasons, which do not imply, in a sense, values.

**Figure 2** Why did you buy Fair-trade products? (Percentage of the most important reason reported)

![Chart showing the reasons for buying Fair-trade products]

*Source:* Demos-Coop / LaPolis (Univ. of Urbino), Observatory on Italians’ Social Capital (4th wave), May 2004.

**Table 4** Why did you buy fair-trade products? (Percentage of the first and the second choice reported)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First reason</th>
<th>Second reason</th>
<th>First + second</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious principles</td>
<td>29,7</td>
<td>7,8</td>
<td>37,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political reasons</td>
<td>21,1</td>
<td>7,1</td>
<td>28,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product taste and quality</td>
<td>25,7</td>
<td>17,7</td>
<td>43,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By chance</td>
<td>15,9</td>
<td>5,5</td>
<td>21,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DK / Refused</td>
<td>7,6</td>
<td>61,8</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* Demos-Coop / LaPolis (Univ. of Urbino), Observatory on Italians’ Social Capital (4th wave), May 2004.
In order to better understand the underlying reasons, Table 4 reveals how many people indicated also the second possibility of giving an answer. It is quite interesting because the frame which emerges is more articulated and complete. As shown in the third column of table 4, it is clear that among those who had bought fair-trade goods more than 4 out 10 indicated the quality of the product.

About the same proportion declared that religious principles were behind their consumption choice (37.5%). Those who recalled political values are nearly 3 out 10 (28.3%). Lastly, the accidental purchase had chanced 2 fair-trade customers out of 10 (21.4%).

On the basis of these answers it is possible to perform a conjunction between the two reasons declared from the respondents. The result can be better seen in figure 3, where three different orientations compose the typology which emerges from the motivations collected.

**Figure 3** Typology of motivations (Percentage)

- There is a type of motivation that involves 36.0% of fair-trade consumers, that we have designated as *non “ethical”* reasons. Citizens who fall in this group had indicated “product taste” or “by chance” as reasons for the fair-trade buying choice.

- Another type of motivation could be defined as *religiously oriented*, 33.5%. Fair-trade consumers included in this category had indicated “religious principles” as purchase reasons combined with one of the two previous *non “ethical”* motivations (Also

*Source*: Demos-Coop / LaPolis (Univ. of Urbino), Observatory on Italians’ Social Capital (4th wave), May 2004.
respondents who had given religious principle as only one response are included in this group).

- Finally the political oriented buycotters: 30.5%. They are the ones who had indicated “political reasons” as the only response or in combination with one of the two non “ethical” motivations.

A socio-economic profile

According to socio-economic traits, the various types of motivation present a specific profile. As reported in table 5 it could be seen as an higher percentage of men, young (15-29 years old) and middle age (45-64 years old), and educated people in the political oriented reasons group. Therefore, regarding the socio-economic condition, students, white collar, managers, professionals are in higher proportion.

Regarding religiously oriented motivations, empirical evidences reveal that gender, age, level of education, socio economic condition are also clearly related with this kind of orientation: women, the elderly, less educated, and housewives are particularly present in this group.

Those who buy fair-trade goods on the strength of non “ethical” motivations seem to have a similar profile of the politically oriented consumers. But there are some differences which have to be highlighted: the level of education is lower, the same is for the proportion of students and there is a higher percentage of blue-collar workers in this group. Moreover, this kind of motivation has a trait of small municipality size whereas the politically oriented motivations represent an urban connotation.

A political profile

To integrate the socio-economic profile illustrated above, and in order to understand more about the reasons behind the fair-trade consumption choice, we are going to take into consideration some attitudes and the participation involvement.

Table 6 reveals clearly how markedly higher the level of participation among politically oriented buycotters is. Almost all the actions taken into account present a remarkable difference among the three motivational models. In particular the more politicised participation acts - such as protest marches, participating in party or political rallies, peace demonstrations and political consumerism acts\(^4\) - are more practised by the politically oriented group. This group is also the more left-wing oriented as shown in the table.

Participating in volunteer associations is nearly the same percentage between politically and religiously oriented buycotters. Many voluntary organizations are in fact connected to the leftist tradition network or strictly linked to the Catholic Church. Self placement on the left-right continuum and the church attendance confirm these two diverse political cultural models which lay behind boycotting actions; the politically

\(^4\) Within fair-trade buycotters all three political consumption acts considered are performed by 31.8% of them. For those who share politically oriented motivations this percentage is the highest: 49.6% (see Table 6).
oriented group presents an higher identification on the left position (42.6%, more than double in comparison with the other group) and the percentage of non churchgoers is the highest (26.2%).

On the other side, religiously oriented buycotters are – coherently – in the largest proportion churchgoers (53.7%); the difference is nearly the double when compared to the other two kind of motivations. In addition, in a relevant percentage, they are not able to place themselves in the ideological continuum. This probably means that they live politics with more disenchantment and marginality (and this is also due to a lower level of cultural resources).

Moreover, a tiny gap characterises the difference between politically oriented and non “ethical” orientated consumers with respect to their involvement in cultural, sport, and recreational organisations. The activism in these kinds of associations characterises the participative pattern of non “ethical” motivated fair-trade consumers (52.1%). However, it must be said that these types of associations are also the ones which are less “political” compared with other participation activities considered.

Furthermore, regarding political culture indicators, such as the sense of political efficacy (internal efficacy) and the evaluation of the democracy or the institutions, the data indicate that politically oriented fair-trade buycotters together with those who are motivated by religious ideals feel less satisfied with citizens’ political influence (Table 6).

Therefore, if the internal political efficacy is lower, it means that these citizens are also more demanding and sophisticated. On the basis of the data collected emerges, quite clearly, that they are not more alienated than other citizens. They are, probably, just more critical (this is particularly true for the politically oriented buycotters, who show a lower satisfaction degree on institutions’ performance).

In fact, they continue to be engaged on conventional political participation forms, albeit they have a negative evaluation of the traditional political process and of the relative actors, as first of all politicians. Indeed, they combine, in their political action repertoire, everyday activities - lifestyle politics - and more conventional modes to participate.

In fact, in particular for those who share politically oriented motivations, their satisfaction with the way public institutions works is lower (36.1% vs. 43% of the other two group). The same table reveals that there is not any significant difference on the evaluation about democracy performance. According to the “critical citizen” theory, the criticism is oriented towards the institutions’ performance and not addressed to democracy itself [Norris 1999]. Moreover, about social capital argument, politically oriented buycotters seem to be more engaged not just in various social and political participation modes, but they also shows an higher confidence on other people (52.1%) as shown on table 6.
Table 5 Socio-economic profile of the different fair-trade buycotters’ motivation types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of motivation (fair-trade buycotting)</th>
<th>Politically oriented</th>
<th>Religiously oriented</th>
<th>Non “ethical” orientation</th>
<th>Overall sample (Italians)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GENDER</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>42,6</td>
<td>29,1</td>
<td>47,6</td>
<td>48,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>57,4</td>
<td>70,9</td>
<td>52,4</td>
<td>51,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-29</td>
<td>27,0</td>
<td>20,0</td>
<td>32,0</td>
<td>22,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-44</td>
<td>32,0</td>
<td>41,5</td>
<td>26,4</td>
<td>27,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-64</td>
<td>32,0</td>
<td>23,7</td>
<td>32,6</td>
<td>29,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 and older</td>
<td>9,0</td>
<td>14,8</td>
<td>9,0</td>
<td>21,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEVEL OF EDUCATION</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school / University degree</td>
<td>56,1</td>
<td>40,8</td>
<td>43,0</td>
<td>34,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle school</td>
<td>35,0</td>
<td>39,3</td>
<td>43,1</td>
<td>38,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary school or lower</td>
<td>8,9</td>
<td>20,0</td>
<td>13,9</td>
<td>27,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOCIOECONOMIC CONDITION</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White collars, directors, managers,</td>
<td>36,3</td>
<td>29,3</td>
<td>27,1</td>
<td>21,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>professionals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue collars</td>
<td>6,6</td>
<td>6,8</td>
<td>19,4</td>
<td>12,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craftsmen, tradesmen</td>
<td>2,5</td>
<td>6,0</td>
<td>6,3</td>
<td>6,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>19,8</td>
<td>9,0</td>
<td>13,9</td>
<td>10,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housewives</td>
<td>18,2</td>
<td>28,6</td>
<td>11,1</td>
<td>18,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pensioners</td>
<td>14,9</td>
<td>17,3</td>
<td>19,4</td>
<td>26,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>1,7</td>
<td>3,0</td>
<td>2,8</td>
<td>4,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MUNICIPALITY SIZE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;5.000</td>
<td>17,2</td>
<td>17,0</td>
<td>24,8</td>
<td>19,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-30.000</td>
<td>28,7</td>
<td>40,7</td>
<td>37,2</td>
<td>37,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-100.000</td>
<td>24,6</td>
<td>25,9</td>
<td>19,3</td>
<td>22,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;100.000</td>
<td>29,5</td>
<td>16,3</td>
<td>18,6</td>
<td>20,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AREA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northwest</td>
<td>34,2</td>
<td>25,2</td>
<td>37,0</td>
<td>26,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>15,0</td>
<td>18,5</td>
<td>14,5</td>
<td>12,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre</td>
<td>17,5</td>
<td>23,7</td>
<td>17,4</td>
<td>18,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>33,3</td>
<td>32,6</td>
<td>31,2</td>
<td>42,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>1424</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Demos-Coop / LaPolis (Univ. of Urbino), Observatory on Italians’ Social Capital (4th wave), May 2004.
### Table 6 Participation and attitudinal profile of the different fair-trade boycotters’ motivation types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of motivation (fair-trade boycotting)</th>
<th>Politically oriented</th>
<th>Religiously oriented</th>
<th>Non “ethical” orientation</th>
<th>Overall sample (Italians)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All 3 political consumption acts done</td>
<td>49,6</td>
<td>28,1</td>
<td>20,1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARTICIPATION FORMS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended party or political rallies</td>
<td>26,8</td>
<td>6,7</td>
<td>9,0</td>
<td>9,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved in initiatives for local or town problems</td>
<td>37,4</td>
<td>29,1</td>
<td>27,6</td>
<td>22,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved in initiatives for environmental or territorial problems</td>
<td>51,6</td>
<td>30,4</td>
<td>30,3</td>
<td>23,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in volunteer associations</td>
<td>41,5</td>
<td>40,0</td>
<td>33,1</td>
<td>26,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in cultural, sport, recreational organizations</td>
<td>59,0</td>
<td>39,3</td>
<td>52,1</td>
<td>37,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in protest marches</td>
<td>38,5</td>
<td>15,6</td>
<td>19,3</td>
<td>15,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in peace demonstrations</td>
<td>62,6</td>
<td>37,8</td>
<td>38,9</td>
<td>31,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in non-legal public protest</td>
<td>15,4</td>
<td>7,4</td>
<td>9,0</td>
<td>7,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in other people</td>
<td>52,1</td>
<td>28,9</td>
<td>32,6</td>
<td>30,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SATISFIED ON THE…</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1-10 scale; % reported: &gt;=6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>political citizens’ influence</td>
<td>20,5</td>
<td>21,5</td>
<td>31,0</td>
<td>24,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>way how public institutions works</td>
<td>36,1</td>
<td>42,5</td>
<td>42,8</td>
<td>36,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>way how democracy works</td>
<td>41,8</td>
<td>40,7</td>
<td>44,8</td>
<td>39,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SELF PLACEMENT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left</td>
<td>42,6</td>
<td>14,8</td>
<td>19,4</td>
<td>19,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre-left</td>
<td>25,2</td>
<td>25,0</td>
<td>26,6</td>
<td>18,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre</td>
<td>8,7</td>
<td>8,3</td>
<td>9,7</td>
<td>8,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre-right</td>
<td>8,7</td>
<td>11,1</td>
<td>16,9</td>
<td>13,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right</td>
<td>5,2</td>
<td>8,3</td>
<td>13,7</td>
<td>11,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non placed</td>
<td>9,6</td>
<td>32,4</td>
<td>13,7</td>
<td>28,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FREQUENCY OF GOING TO CHURCH</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>26,2</td>
<td>2,2</td>
<td>17,9</td>
<td>14,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasionally</td>
<td>41,0</td>
<td>44,1</td>
<td>49,0</td>
<td>48,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Churchgoer</td>
<td>32,8</td>
<td>53,7</td>
<td>33,1</td>
<td>37,5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N: 122 136 145 1203-1420

Source: Demos-Coop / LaPolis (Univ. of Urbino), Observatory on Italians’ Social Capital (4th wave), May 2004.
5. Another ethical way to use money (and its motivations)

Charitable donations were also investigated in this survey on Italians’ social capital. Respondents who had declared to have carried out monetary donations to local, national or international organizations, or other kind of donations - like clothing, food and so on - had to also indicate the relevant degree of a set of diverse motivations.

It is quite interesting for our purposes to also take into consideration this practice. It is, in fact, another way to use money or material things on the basis of ethical considerations. Trying to understand which kind of relationship links on the one hand the reasons behind boycotting acts and, on the other, the charitable donations, allow us to enrich the motivational profile we are drawing.

Then, if the charitable donation choice reasons are broken down by the three types of boycotting motivations, it is possible to see a rather clear pattern. As shown in table 7 there is a sort of overlapping among the factors behind these socio-economic solidarity actions. In fact the data shown reveals that those who boycott on the strength of political motivations are more likely to explain also the donation choice by these kinds of reasons:

1) the political values and orientation (18,4% vs. 3,9% for religiously oriented and 3,5% for non “ethical” reasons oriented);
2) the current international situation (15,8% vs. 10,9% and 9,9%);
3) the excessive gap between rich and poor countries (54,8% vs. 27,4% and 26,4%).

With regard to the ethical use of the money, this group of buycotters is characterised in a motivational model, where the political significance is central in supporting different socio-economic solidarity actions, such as buying fair-trade products or making charitable donations.

Taking into consideration those who declared buying fair-trade products on the basis of religious principles, the evidences shown (Table 7) indicate that the same values also markedly motivate the choice of making charitable donations: the percentage is 49,6% vs. 19,3% (of political oriented buycotters) or 13,2% (for non “ethical” reasons group).

Finally, continuing our analysis, fair-trade buyers on the basis of non “ethical” reasons do not present the same clear motivational profile with regard to the charitable donations as we have seen for the two previous groups.

It confirms that this third group of “buycotters”, even though it “morally” uses money and carries out socio-economic solidarity actions, is not as deeply involved as the political and religious oriented buycotters.

They make the same purchase decisions or donation choices, but these actions are not endured by the same motivational approach. When the distinctions among the three groups are taken into account some differences clearly emerge. These diverse orientations, together with the evidences that we have seen above, appear to shape a peculiar social approach to this matter by citizens involved in these styles of consumptions. The reasons behind boycotting actions seem to extend to charitable donation practices too.

In fact, it appears that there is a different degree of consciousness regarding social and moral concerns and values themselves.
In particular, *politically oriented* buycotters are also the ones who markedly motivate donations recalling international, social, and political problems. Whereas *religious oriented* buycotters coherently remark firstly on ethical and religious values. Non “ethical” buycotters, on the contrary, give the idea of a sort of disenchantment touch to their motivational perspective.

**Table 7 Reasons behind charitable donation by fair-trade boycotters’ motivation types**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors behind charitable donation acts (% of &lt;&lt;strongly&gt;&gt; influenced)</th>
<th>Political oriented</th>
<th>Religious oriented</th>
<th>Non “ethical” reasons</th>
<th>Overall sample (Italians)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious principles</td>
<td>19,3</td>
<td>49,6</td>
<td>13,2</td>
<td>23,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal values</td>
<td>60,5</td>
<td>57,4</td>
<td>48,3</td>
<td>44,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political ideology</td>
<td>18,4</td>
<td>3,9</td>
<td>3,5</td>
<td>5,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current international situation</td>
<td>15,8</td>
<td>10,9</td>
<td>9,9</td>
<td>9,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excessive gap between rich and poor countries</td>
<td>54,8</td>
<td>27,4</td>
<td>26,4</td>
<td>25,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone invited directly me or by means Tv, mail, poster ad…</td>
<td>7,9</td>
<td>5,4</td>
<td>6,9</td>
<td>6,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge and trust toward association which use these donations</td>
<td>27,8</td>
<td>23,1</td>
<td>22,2</td>
<td>17,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal gratification in doing donations</td>
<td>36,8</td>
<td>40,0</td>
<td>35,2</td>
<td>33,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td>115</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>1235-1257</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Demos-Coop / LaPolis (Univ. of Urbino), Observatory on Italians’ Social Capital (4\textsuperscript{th} wave), May 2004.*

6. More in depth: which politics behind?

This final part of the paper aims to deepen the reasons behind the choice of buying fair-trade products, using qualitative interviews. Attention is particularly concentrated on the political argument and representations. The empirical evidences reported come from three bachelor’s theses\(^5\) which focused on this subject. The interviews were carried out on customers in front of fair-trade shops in three different Italian cities. The analysis of the interviews suggests some interesting empirical evidences for our purposes. A selection – and the synthesis of them - is the following:

\(^5\) The author wish to thank Valentina Ferraboschi, Elisa Petrini and Edoardo Pappalardo who allowed the use of the results of their in-depth interviews on which this part of the work is based.
- About politics: involvement and expectation on one side, feeling of distaste for parties and disappointment for traditional politics and political actors on the other;

- Motivations: manifest ethical meaning and the latent political content behind the boycotting choices;

- Two ethical overtones: leftist (solidaristic) and Catholic (charitable), but united in one common purpose, the disadvantaged people;

- The target: the close connection (and responsibility), at global level, between economy and politics: multinational corporations as first target and enemy, the market as arena;

- The actions: little, concrete, day to day, for a better world and for (buycotters) feeling better.

Traditional politics? A feeling of emptiness and criticism

A common element emerges from reading the interviews which interlaces all the responses given by the boycotters: the feeling of disenchantment with parties and the scarce political responsiveness. Words such as <<egoistic>>, <<confused>>, <<distant>>, <<corrupted>> and also <<disgusting>> are often used to define the political system and its actors. The interviewees see traditional politics like something far away from the social needs and citizens’ interests, something which has lost the touch with the society and its components. On the other hand, also the hope that things will change clearly emerges, thanks also to this citizens’ responsibility taking in everyday life behaviour. Democracy is never called into question by respondents. With reference to politics an interviewee said:

It is a scandalous situation, sad, I hope it will end soon. […] We need politicians who are better people, they have to discover values and ideals to follow and not just to put their mind to hang on their seats, they just want to keep the seat under their cheek. (Stefania, F, 53 y.o.)

According to the respondent’s perspective, that which is problematical are the political actors and the degeneration of political life.

In fact, the criticisms are mainly oriented towards parties and politicians, which are strongly self-referenced. The argument of the accountability and the responsiveness emerge very often from their words and, sometimes, from their swearwords. But the use of this kind of language means that there is a significant involvement in politics, a sense of dissatisfaction and the presence of a demanding orientation within buycotters.

Even though most of the respondents identify themselves in the leftist cultural area or some of them recall the Catholic values as an ideological reference, they do not show any remarkable party identification. They keep abreast of politics, by means TV, newspapers, or the Internet, as it was explicitly said during the interview. They participate in social and political initiatives. Moreover, they pointed out that they always cast a vote, but it is not a choice to express an identity: they just vote << the lesser of two evils>>.
Currently there is not a party that I prefer, or that I could say it is mine. My political orientation is leftist ...but when I go for casting a vote I just vote the lesser of two evils and that’s it. (Fausto, M, 43 y.o.)

Politicians are seen as thoughtless, indifferentist, without values and ideals, the main reason for the <<scandalous situation>> in which politics is nowadays. And, at the same time, they express a strong demand of radical change:

[...] we need innovation at the political level, we need someone who governs with clear, strong and innovative ideals, which lead towards concrete solutions...and then we need politicians to stop thinking just about their interests and seats, they have to remember that they are in office to represent us who had voted them in (Andrea, M, 24 y.o.)

In the end, nowadays politics is seen as something which is not able to represent people’s moral and political concerns; it is, in other words, an inefficient tool.

It emerges, in the first place, a critical mood toward political parties and their leaders. Fair-trade buycotters are also frustrated with how politics works; then forms of individualized political participation engagement seem to be, on their perspective, the right choice to give a sense to their political involvement (and identity).

**Manifest ethical meaning, latent political contents**

The key question asked was about the reason why our interviewees *buycotted* these products. What in the first place emerges from the responses is the ethical meaning of this practice. Buycotters explicitly say that it is a choice based on rooted solidaristic values. They say that behind their decision to buy fair-trade products, there are values and orientations such as the respect for the people, concern for the environment, and values of solidarity and social justice. A young buycotter says:

[...] the ones who carry out this kind of consumption, I think, want to express the hope towards the creation and the development of an alternative trade model, right, correct, which could help those who are in a disadvantaged situation, like in the poor countries. I see a fair-trade purchase in this way (Andrea, M. 20 y.o.)

Not just solidarity, but also the concreteness in everyday life, with reference to social problems, is a meaning associated to fair-trade purchasing:

*I want to change the world where we live today. This is a little step toward the big change that is necessary to make, but, in the meantime, it is something done...let’s start doing something now, then time and fate will continue it.* (Daniela, F, 59 y.o.)

On the one hand, interviewees easily talk about the ethical reasons which lay behind fair-trade consumption. On the other, we have noted that there was a sort of difficulty in
talking about political meaning of these consumption acts. They seem embarrassed to associate this word – politics - with their choice. It comes, probably, from the very bad idea they have about politics, and because of this, they do not want to <<contaminate>> the significance of this consumption practice using that word.

To buy here is a solidarity act. [...] Of course it gives absolutely an ethical message, but in part is also political, but just a bit. I hope that the raising of this phenomenon will become an alarm bell for the world rulers [...] Yes, it is a political message, but in inverted commas, it is for everyone, for all political and cultural orientations! [...] Being myself Catholic form me it is a strong message of helping others. (Samanta, F)

Another woman interviewed in front of the fair-trade shop says what follows:

When I buy products here I am sure to help those who need this help [...]. I buy only for that reason. That is a concrete act of solidarity towards the other, towards indigent people. This is the reason I buy in these shops. I would like to give this consumption an ethical value, but I do not know if it is completely true, I think there is also a political meaning [...]. I do that for my individual values, for my personal conscience and for the children who seem to be the most unprotected in the world. I am married, my husband agrees with it, I think that it is important also for our child upbringing, they have to be sensitive to some problems and it could become a guideline for their life [...] it is a civic duty, but, above all, I would say that it is just moral! It comes from your faith and then becomes part of your life as a citizen [...] (Valeria, F)

Finally, the following words synthesise very well how politics is seen from the consumers’ perspective:

[fair-trade consumption] ... is an expression of an ethical creed, social and why not political. Also if you are not in the position to have a voice by means political parties - which ought to represent you - you look for other ways to express your voice, other methods! [...] if politics is a way to say something about how you would like the world to be, this is a way [the fair-trade consumption] to express my point of view (Maria, F)

I believe in what I do, and I think that this is a political expression, but more pure and less contaminated. (Giulia, F).

These choices, according to the interviewees’ words, are little but concrete, it is day to day activism, where <<public opinion directly, without intermediaries>> plays an important role (which means, in other words, individual responsibility taking and no delegation).

Finally, a funny definition of fair-trade purchasing is the following: <<[...] it is a voluntary work that does not make you sweating>>. It makes the world better (this is the respondents’ transversal hope) and the consumers feel better with themselves when they
make that kind of purchase. So this socio-economic solidarity action has also a self-
expressive meaning.

As we have seen on the responses collected, fair-trade boycotters are reluctant to
associate political significance to their consumption decisions. This may also imply that
political significance, as motivation, tend to be underestimated on survey research (at the
minimum in the Italian case).

Ethical overtones

It is also interesting to point out that behind the two main cultural traditions
involved in the fair-trade phenomenon – also from the organizational point of view – two
overtones regarding ethical arguments clearly emerge: leftist and Catholic buycotters give
slightly different interpretations. This matter falls inside the general frame which is
characterised from the solidarity purposes in favour of disadvantaged people: <<helping
others is the best way of doing politics>> it was said by one respondent.

However, the buycotters closer to the leftist culture talk about the ethical and
solidaristic purposes in terms of <<social injustice>>, <<sweating>>, <<economic
development>>, <<monkey business of multinational corporate>>. They use more
“militant” words.

On the other hand, the tradition connected to religious values uses other words,
such as <<Christian charity>>, <<catholic principles and practices>>, <<helping
others>>, they often recall the moral teaching and the Word.

But in the end it is clear that a sort of convergence between Catholic charitable
ideals and the socialist solidarity culture takes shape in the name of the same purposes and
concerns. In fact, a sort of contact point between these two ideological perspectives
emerges.

For a long time these two political cultures had represented, particularly in the
Italian scenario, the polarity of a deep socio-political cleavage. The complex phenomenon
of buycotting embodies different traditional and political cultures, which have particular
concerns in common: environmental, social, civic, charitable and so on.

Politics and economy, economy and politics

These two spheres are strictly connected in the buycotters’ point of view. They have
it clear in their mind that by hitting the economy, it is possible to influence the politics
too. Stefania’s words are very clear about this aspect:

[the meaning of this kind of consumption] is ethical because it is linked to a
moral discourse, helping others, it rebounds on the social sphere, because I
hope to help poor farmers in the world. But it is also a political discourse
because the economic world is embroiled in the political one, by influencing the
economic world it is possible to influence the political one, too (Stefania, F, 53
y.o.)

It is interesting to see that in the first place interviewees talk about the ethical
reasons. Then, when they go on talking and expanding on this subject, the idea of
consumption as a citizens’ tool to influence politics clearly emerges from their words. So
on one hand they try to “hide” the political valence of their choice, but on the other – almost contradicting themselves – they underline the political relevance of consumption in the public sphere. This argument comes out especially when they talk about the relationship between politics and economy.

The market, in fact, is seen as an arena where citizens are able to express their dissatisfaction towards politics and politicians. They are political actors who are not in tune with citizens, and it does not take into consideration their concerns. The same interviewee says:

[…] consumption is surely a way to make our voice heard when it seems that no one pays attention to us. Consumption moves the world. In trying to practice alternative forms of consuming it is possible to get the idea across to the one who ought to understand it [Politicians] that we do not tolerate some situation anymore. Moreover [...] the economy and politics walk arm in arm…consuming in a particular way makes us able to participate in politics, yes it could be said in this way, I think (Stefania, F, 53 y.o.).

Conclusion

Testing some specific hypotheses or trying to “explain”, by means of a causal model, the consumption choices made by buycotters was not this paper’s purpose. The central aim, in fact, was to explore the motivations, values and the social representations behind these socio-economic solidarity actions.

In order to represent a true picture of this argument, quantitative and qualitative sources of data have been used to better understand the underlying reasons for the behaviour.

1. What firstly emerges from the analysis is an articulated way of living the experience of buycotting and boycotting. As the empirical evidences have shown, there is sort of continuum which ranges from the fair-trade purchase, to the ethical consumption choice, and then to the boycotting action. The political involvement increases as the citizens move towards the boycotting initiatives. The empirical evidences collected make it clear that political consumerism is a complex experience, both from the practices and from the motivational points of view. Survey research programmes in most cases include just a few indicators in the questionnaire, which do not cover the complexity and the various dimensions of the phenomenon itself.

2. A large proportion of Italian fair-trade buycotters declare that their main values points of reference are religious. In that regard the “Italian case” is particular due to its social history, where the traditional Catholic political culture and the organizational network associated with it plays an important role in shaping this experience on the territory.

But, there are not just religious principles: the leftist ideology is also strictly linked to the way in which this kind of consumption is seen from buycotters’ perspective. There
are also (terminological) differences, between Catholic and left wing oriented buycotters, in the way in which the solidarity is defined. It is quite relevant since the decision to choose these products is based on this idea. But in the end the traditional ideological cleavage does not seem to be as deep as it was in the past. These two political cultures have found a contact point in the name of the same concerns (but also for the common practices, the targets, the effects wanted, and about the basic solidaristic values which lay behind these consuming choices).

The importance of this matter suggests that the peculiarity of a single country has to be systematically taken into account in order to understand more about this critical way of consumption, especially when the phenomenon is analysed using surveys in a cross-national perspective. In fact, the same behaviour – i.e. fair-trade consumption - could be supported by different reasons, and “standardized” questions are not able to catch in a proper way the articulated motivations behind.

3. Regarding the politics behind this alternative way of consuming and spending, it is interesting to highlight a sort of “contradiction” which emerges from the words pronounced by the buycotters. In fact, they put in the first place ethical reasons and solidarity values to justify their choice. At the same time they try to downsize the impact of the political meaning of this decision. It seems, in fact, that they want to hide this motivation, even if this meaning is implicitly present in their perspective.

This is due to the interpretation they give to the word “politics”. This word, in fact, raises a negative feeling in them. It reminds them of traditional politics, the parties, the leaders, which are seen as being detached from society and self-referential.

It is quite evident that they do not want to contaminate their personal and direct expression of involvement and this kind of responsibility taking; which is seen particularly as being pure, diverse, without any delegation, if compared with the traditional forms of participation.

Moreover, notwithstanding the difficulty to define this way of consuming as political, when interviewees go on talking about their experience, the impression which clearly and spontaneously emerges from their words demonstrates that all the political participation elements are present in their minds; the targets to hit, the influence and the change they want to achieve.

Furthermore, buycotters are fully aware that they are doing something “little”, but concrete in their everyday life. This consumption act is seen as a form of responsibility taking in order to try both changing social and market conditions and send a message to the global society, public opinion, economy and politics. The disclosure aim is, in fact, recurrent in the social representation. Buycotters are fully aware that everyone of them is a knot of larger communicative network, where the endeavour to circulate the information is seen as a strategic effort.

Buycotters are aware that they are part of a larger “individualised” network. Even though they act alone, they do not feel alone. They feel powerful because they think consumers have a strategic tool in their hands. They are also highly involved in various
social and political participation forms. They get information about alternative ways of spending money, reading critical consumption guides, surfing the Internet and so on.

They talk about the politics behind products and some of them “forced” their family members to consume these products (even if they are more expensive than conventional ones).

Fair-trade buycotters do not use, of course, the <<political consumers>> category to define themselves (it belongs to the academic lexicon), but they are perfectly aware that they are carrying out a form of political action, different from the conventional ones.

Buycotters are aware that they are doing something innovative - <<emerging>> we say - which is not just a tool for citizens’ influence or for those who distrust conventional politics. This practice also gives sense and identification to the buycotters. It also fills a feeling of emptiness, facing the crises of the (traditional) politics, which they would like to have in a different shape.

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