"Chanting for Prada" - how ethnographic research examining the social life of brands and consumers is informing new approaches for encouraging individuals to create sustainable lifestyles and practices in their everyday life.

The last decade has seen a massive growth in the use of ethnographic research and researchers to inform and actively contribute to the creation of not only new consumer technologies, products, brands and services but also by public organisations seeking to address the costs and consequences of those behaviours for the environment and the well being of society as a whole. This paper draws from 12 years spent deep hanging out for companies and entrepreneurs and will aim to illustrate how the insights generated by such experiences are now being used to encourage individuals to adopt more sustainable lifestyles and practices in their everyday life.

In particular, the paper will examine how understanding the contexts and motivations of consumers in situ has opened up new ways to change behaviours that challenge the conventional mechanisms of persuasion and marketing rhetoric which hitherto have generated mixed and sometimes negative results against the goal of encouraging individuals to become more sustainable in their consumption behaviours.

1. An island in the storm

In September 2008 I found myself in California, presenting to a conference of anthropologists, technologists, social researchers and financial experts on the subject of Everyday Digital Money. It was the week that Lehman's was allowed to go bust and afforded a front seat experience at the collapse of the American Dream. The sense of shock was palpable as previous certainties were replaced by fundamental questions about the benefits of free capital and markets could bring to society. It was not so much that the Emperor was wearing no clothes, but that they had been borrowed and sold several times over and now the debts were being called in.

It was here that I first started to hear about the 'real economy' and various of the speakers began to critique the processes by which what you might characterise as 'industrial' or 'solid modern' money had overtaken the conventional modes of wealth creation and become both an opportunity for enrichment and risk in what turned out to be unequal measure. The theme was a familiar one for someone who had spent the previous 10 years inside financial organisations trying to introduce some alternative ideas about what money is and how it is used and valued in everyday life;

specifically how money had become ‘disconnected’ from the ‘social world’ and reduced to a technological object of mechanistic markets and economics.

My presentation was about how as an “entrepreneurial ethnographer”, I had played a part in the creation of www.zopa.com ; at that point mainly known as an academically interesting talking point for the future of money and peer to peer networks, but hardly more than a drop in the ocean of finance. What became clear over the coming weeks and months was that Zopa represented something far more than just an alternative way for individuals to lend and borrow money, it represented a way of thinking about money which challenged the myths written since the industrial revolution that has allowed financial services to become not the lubricant, but the engine of the modern, largely Western economies. Zopa stood as an island in the storm, seemingly immune from the credit crunch, changes in LIBOR and offering a relative safe haven for money looking to invest or borrowers looking for a source of credit.

This paper will seek to illustrate why Zopa has thrived through the ‘Age of Austerity’ and how the insights which led to its creation have wider application in the challenges of re-building the ‘real economy’ as something sustainable both economically and environmentally. It will also demonstrate how the thought of Zygmunt Bauman was instrumental in bringing about the changes of perspective and understanding of the meaning of consumption in everyday life which allowed a team of bankers, researchers and marketers create something genuinely new and radical and something which conventional banking and economic wisdom said ‘would never work’.

2. Bauman in the Barn

Zopa was created out of conversations in a barn. It was the meeting place of an informal collective called New Barn Studios which was made up of a slowly expanding group of disaffected colleagues who were in the process of leaving egg plc. Egg itself was in the process of being bought and sold by its large corporate finance owners which would inevitably lead it back into the mainstream fold of financial services. Leading the conversation was Richard Duvall, one of the original founders of egg and a man on a mission to find what he called ‘a new point of view’. He telephoned for me to meet him at his barn and share my thoughts and experiences. At the time I was working as a freelance ethnographer studying “the social life of money” within egg and a number of other financial services companies. Duvall had lost faith in the ideals of what he called ‘consumerisation’, which had driven the creation of everything from breakfast cereals to mobile phones would revolutionise financial services in any meaningful sense for individuals. He felt that thinkers like Bauman and the application of ethnographic approaches to commercial market research created new ways of thinking and innovating which challenged the dominant interpretation of the praxis of consumption.

This new thinking was born from a change of context, both macro and micro, for examining the practices of consumption. It wasn't a process of 'blue sky creativity' which generated this change, but the immersion within and application of thinkers like Bauman, Douglas, Appadurai and Mauss, whose ideas challenged the conventional narratives of consumption and money produced by marketing science. They helped situate the 'consumer' within alternative conceptions of the social, political and cultural context where individual motivations became contradictory and messy, where questions of ethics and morality muddied the waters of rational, scientific choice, and where an individual 'short term' tactics could start to be seen as in fact strategic and long term in nature. Duvall liked to call it 'the individual revolution', but in reality the revolution was in our minds rather than 'out there' in society as a whole.

In the past, introducing Bauman into the boardroom had always had CEO's scratching their heads (or as one succinctly put it "your presentations always leave me with a headache, but one you can't just get rid of with an aspirin"), but in the barn it became the catalyst for real change. Such insights became all the more powerful when the micro level experiences of ethnographic descriptions and observations provided fertile ground for thinking about the application of the themes and trends highlighted by Bauman and others 'out there' in the 'real world'.

I use the word catalyst deliberately, because in many ways Zopa represents an alternative vision of the potential of consumerism to effect real social change and specifically the possibility to make consumption itself more ethical and sustainable in society. It is based on a more optimistic view of the relationship between individuals and what they consume, and seeks to harness, admittedly for commercial gain, the implicit ethics and values which consumers apply to the use of consumer goods and services in everyday life. In fact it goes further to challenge the conventional narrative of the 'why' of consumption which frames the individual in terms of needs and the value of 'benefits'.

The roots of this optimism are grounded in 'deep hanging out' with individuals and observing their use of goods and services in everyday life.

3. Chanting for Prada

As part of a study of people making decisions about money and investment, I found myself seated at a Bank Holiday BBQ in a suburb of North London near to where the BBC soap "Eastenders" is actually filmed. It is the summer of 2002 and the conversation turns to a neighbour who has recently had a big pay out from a Critical Illness insurance policy. "Yes", others generally agree, "that is the best insurance to get nowadays ... with medical advances you have a reasonable chance of surviving the illness and getting to enjoy the money. What is the point of life insurance when you don't get to enjoy the benefit?" The conversation continues with discussion of the complex lives of the inhabitants of this particular cul-de-sac which is nicknamed 'divorcee alley' and forms the migratory stopping point of a number of ex-wives following separation from some relatively well off husbands using the equity from marital homes situated at the top of the hill. Liquid modernity is all around, with the ever changing choices and resolutions of consumerism providing a sop to the very real challenges of single motherhood, relationship breakdown and financial security. The children are playing around the house, while the teenage son of the household is smoking some fairly aromatic weed on the front lawn which I notice is growing in the greenhouse out back.

A friend of my subject arrives, freshly blonde and dressed in black with a large amount of new age style jewellery and accessories. She announces that she is late because she has been 'chanting'; a practice which she says will help realise her personal goals and ideals. She is very different from the others in both her manner and dress and seems to elicit a mixture of respect and fear as someone who is seeking a more authentic alternative and taking some risks in life to achieve her goals. Prompted in part by her incongruous language and lifestyle compared to the others around the BBQ table, I ask her what she was chanting for.

The friend looks at me and dead pans "Prada, darling, I am chanting for Prada!"

4. From needs to meaning

It was the realisation of a kernel of truth within the friend's humorous story which began to erode some of my own certainties about consumerism built up from many years working as a consultant to companies such as Unilever, British Airways and Barclays. It became difficult to escape the notion that the value of an product or experience as realised in everyday life went beyond a purely materialistic concept of value. The conventional consumer narrative and conventional market research was insufficient to explain the complexity of motivation for consumers and the source of 'added value' which underpins the creation and investment in brands. Ordinary people didn't draw any distinction between consumer culture and the values and ethics of their everyday life. Perhaps more importantly, they didn't also appear (despite the exhortations of consumer drinks brands) 'live life to the MAX", and in fact often operated in the market not to maximise and 'trade up' to a better life but rather to navigate some difficult ethical choices, competing ideals and everyday compromises.

This is not to suggest that consumers are not behaving ‘economically’, on the contrary understanding what drives people to consume beyond the satisfaction of ‘consumer needs’ is a vital part of capitalist value creation. It is easiest to illustrate it from a real example within one of the global multinationals of consumerism, Nestle. In the 1980’s, Nestle calculated that they had achieved the acme of added value to a cup of coffee which in their terms equated to 8 cents per cup. This represented the greatest premium they could add to any cup of coffee they produced through their instant product. Attempts to expand that premium through the creation of chains of coffee shops had largely failed and it was generally assumed that such establishments would remain largely local, cottage style businesses whose potential for “added value” was inconsistent and unreliable on a global scale.

Of course, this calculation is based on the idea of consumerism as the means to the satisfaction of a materially defined end, namely the consumption of the product and the realisation of its emotional and functional benefits to the individual consumer. The maximum which the convenience and quality of the instant granules combined with the powerful and expensive “soap style” advertising campaigns could achieve was a significant premium over the cost of production. Such a maximum ‘value’ was measurable and quantifiable and, with the benefit of hindsight, completely wrong.

If the creator of Starbucks had followed Nestle’s rational and empirical analysis of the potential value of a cup of coffee he would not have been able to explain why it was that in places like Italy coffee was far more highly valued and consumed in a very different manner. For Nestle such experiences did not participate in what they would define as the ‘instant coffee’ market. Such a definition ignored the social and cultural value of why people consume coffee and why they do it in certain contexts and how by creating the right experience and ‘meaning’ to that coffee experience you could charge not 8 cents a cup but perhaps 2, 3 or 4 dollars a cup. As we will see later in the case of Coca Cola, the desire for certainty and a lack of faith in the value or perhaps even the ‘reality’ of culture and the importance of the production of meaning in everyday life can blind even the most technologically enabled organisations to alternative accounts of the role their product plays in the life of their consumers.

5. The Social Life of Things

The effect of the ‘rich description’ of ethnography detailing experiences like ‘Chanting for Prada’ within commercial organisations achieved more than merely voyeuristic engagement (although ethnography will always be more “interesting” than endless focus groups which made up so much of commercial research at that time). The stories, which were told and re-told both within egg and increasingly as people left the organisation and worked elsewhere, began to challenge some of the assumptions and internal truths which informed the way in which financial services organisations constructed their brands, their service and most importantly, their idea of money.

It was possible to identify moments for individuals or teams when suddenly it would become clear that the meaning of a thing, even something as ubiquitous as money, was not fixed by its Financial Services Authority "category", or by any purely psychological narrative, or even by economists, but through the social and cultural meaning created or produced by its usage. Not only were their epistemological assumptions challenged by this experience, importantly they began to realise how that process was an 'on-going conversation' or dialogue rather than a search for an objectively agreed dictionary definition. Far from being the passive consumers of brands and marketing communications, the liquid modern consumer was becoming the producer of their own meaning; unable as they were to trust in the conventional certainties of tradition, established institutions and ideologies and with new forms of communication and experience constantly being placed at their beck and call.

Of course, within the academic world, papers such as Appadurai's "A social life of things" (1986) and Mary Douglas's own conception that "product is neutral; usage is social" (World of Goods: 1972) make this change of perspective seem perhaps both a little late and at best naive. However, the greater barrier was the fact that such perspectives challenged the conventional hierarchies and power relations between brands and their consumers, and between organisations and their customers. This is what Duvall meant by the need for a new point of view. To understand what was happening 'on the ground' marketing needed to get back to its main function within any commercial organisation – understanding the 'why' of consumption.

6. The social life of money

In many ways, money is the acid test of these new 'point of view'. Money in financial services represents the acme of the 'market commodity'. It can be bought and sold in a millisecond, every second of the day, and exchanged between individuals who can be practically anywhere in the world. However, for such a globalised industry the retail of financial services products is remarkably 'local'. Many brands have tried to emulate the consumer goods giants such as Unilever and P&G by extending their reach around the world but find that the value of their goods and services changes radically between different social and cultural contexts. In reality, Unilever does not sell washing powder or fabric conditioner in the same way everywhere in the world, however much its accountants would like it to do so, and likewise money, and its manifestations as credit, debt, loans, cards, payments, accounts etc does not conform to some global blueprint. Egg found this to its enormous cost when it tried to convert the French to the idea of a UK style credit card – losing £300 million in the process – and despite the claims of HSBC and CitiGroup to be global institutions, their local operations still rely on local knowledge and cultural insight (whether consciously enacted or just part of 'what is obvious and unremarkable') to manage their day to day business.

Zelizer (1994) and Maurer (2005) have helped to illustrate the importance of social and cultural context in defining both the meaning and usage of money. My own experiences mirror the examples which Zelizer refers to as 'compartmentalisation' where categories of money applied by consumers fly in the face of conventional 'financial' practice and advice. Perhaps the most easily accessible of these experiences occurred during a participant observation of a newly qualified teacher in the UK who was setting up home on her own for the first time. The study was part of a wider project to examine the times when money was made 'visible' in people's lives and tested an hypothesis that money for the most part was something invisible in our lives, like electricity, and hence not something we engage with on a daily basis as anything more than the means to get things done. Only when money was 'out of place' do we begin to address what money we have and what we are doing with our money which for a bank was both a startling revelation (as within banks people think about money every day) and an insight (that in reality money and banks were a tiny part of the everyday life and concerns of individuals in the liquid modern context).

The respondent detailed her 'budget' which consisted of a series of direct debit transactions from which the majority of her money from her teaching salary was deducted leaving very little money that was discretionary or 'usable' in any meaningful sense. Her narrative was one of thrift and careful spending. However, at the same time we constantly had a discussion about her plans for her new flat (50% financed by a government key worker scheme which shared equity with the owners) which involved either a new kitchen or a new bathroom. The costs of both choices were pretty equal and were set by a budget based on the amount of savings she had in an ISA (Individual Savings Account). The main interest of this conversation was not what the money was going to be spent on but where it had come from. The respondent was newly qualified and hadn't worked at university, she said that the money had not come from her parents and she had only £100 of disposable income at the end of the month for going out and shopping.

Eventually, after three visits it transpired that the source of these 'savings' was in fact the student loan which she had taken out as a student and 'saved' in an ISA for a 'rainy day'. For an individual working within the world of financial services this behaviour is irrational. The rational account would equate the debt of her student loan with the credit of her savings account leaving her with zero. However, the loan did still exist for the respondent, in the form of a direct debit in her monthly budget 'freeing up' the money to be used for a different purpose.

Based on this and other analyses of such 'compartmentalised' thinking on money it is possible to argue that the seeds of the credit bubble and ensuing crunch in the UK, at least on the demand side of the equation, were sown not only by 'soft touch' regulation of financial markets and lack of understanding of the hidden risks in the trade of debt derivatives, but also the "invention" of the 0% credit card and the 100% mortgage. The risks that these products created both for the individuals who bought them and the institutions which supplied them were invisible because both were operating within very different cultural frames for the meaning and usage of money in everyday life. It was not a psychological 'addiction' to credit which drove us, although it is perhaps convenient to think of it as such, but the creation of a moral and ethical absolution (or perhaps 'indulgence') which overrode the implicit obligations of debt built up within western culture over the centuries.

On a personal level, as a classicist turned anthropologist, this feels a very familiar problem. Lending and borrowing in Ancient Athens (Millett: 1991) provides in depth ethnographic insights into the social and cultural mores which constructed debt in 4th Century Athens through examination of numerous law court speeches. In Athens, debts between individuals were divided into two categories: eranos loans (without interest) and money lending. Eranos loans were between people within demes and neighbourhoods where the borrower would know, or at least share acquaintances with the lender. The convention was that such loans were made without interest being charged and repayable in full at some point (not a fixed time). The obligation implicit in the loan was that the lender expected the borrower to return the favour if the situations were reversed in the future. This was the classic response the micro climate risks of peasant farming upon which most of the citizens of Athens relied for their income where having a particular slope and being exposed to a particular storm or wind could destroy a crop or kill an animal. As the polis became larger and the connections between individuals were more fluid and ambiguous, the future obligation to pay back the 'credit' with a return loan was commuted into a payment of the principle "with interest". These loans between strangers (provided by individuals who operated not as banks but as entrepreneurs) often funded maritime cargoes and as such were highly risky investments. Millett explicitly wrote his treatise to combat the best efforts of the Classicists of the middle 20thcentury who sort to identify the birth of a 'free market' underpinning the original free democracy and also to attack ideas of technological progress underlying developments in credit within high finance and on the high street. In Athens, loans between strangers were made at a rate of interest which was fixed by social convention at 1% per month, deviations of even a quarter or half percent on this figure were perceived as excessive and usury (and hence very 'un-Athenian') rather than any rational assessment and pricing of "risk". That rate remained largely unchanged for 500 years as far the records (largely from law court speeches) describe. The role of interest was not a function of the rational calculation of risk but instead a largely symbolic or ethical element of the transaction, which was to signify to the borrower, who wasn't known to the lender, that there was an obligation to pay back the loan – i.e. that it was not a gift (the word for gift and the word for a loan in Homeric and 5th Century Greek are closely related in their etymology).

Such practice is still to be found today in Russia where the consumer credit market is still several decades behind developed western economies and where it is very important for a bank or lender to assert that obligation if they want to see the money again!

7. Science, "savoir faire" and consumption

Again, these stories run counter to the beliefs of governments and financial services companies that modern money is the engine of progress and change but somehow rooted in something 'real' (Fisher:2009). In the same way, commercial research has largely invented a 'science' of consumers and consumerism which has little basis in the observable micro context, where the concepts of needs, segments and benefits are not only revealed as overly reductionist and simplistic but more importantly failing to capture the complexity and contradictions of context and motivations of the individual in any given act of consumption. What is evident from observation is that the account of consumerism which has dominated marketing thinking in the 20th century in reality describes a very limited; at worst being erroneous and at best describing only an increasingly minor element of individual motivation. The concept of 'unexpected consequences' being a function of the scientific process ignoring or even masking the complex mix of motives that drive responses to changes or innovations within the market.

While researching money in Russia, my guide and translator (who was originally from Ukraine but now lived in St. Petersburg) told me a joke about Muscovites. Two Muscovites are drinking in a bar. One says to the other, "I like your new suit, how much did it cost?" "$5000," replies his friend. "Shame," says the first, "I know a place where you could have bought it for $10000".

The science of consumerism as applied in the commercial context has very little to say about this joke beyond the obvious connotations of taste and class. It would be a brave market researcher indeed that presented their client with a segment of individuals who deliberately set out to pay over the odds for their brands – paying more than the 'market rate' – in an attempt at differentiation. This is because the science of consumerism does not have a satisfactory account for why we pay more for brands when the products they sell are often imperceptibly different in terms of their functional delivery of benefits. The usual suspects of ‘trust’, ‘quality’ and ‘loyalty’ and ‘emotional benefits’ are usually accepted without question and articulated by marketing literate consumers who arguably know that these are the socially acceptable answers. In any case, such statements always imply a zero sum of value in for value out. The reciprocation between individuals is closed at the end of the transaction with all obligations cancelled out.

The most famous example of this failure was the launch of ‘New Coke’ in the 1990’s. Shaken by the success of the Pepsi Challenge (not just in terms of market share but also “share of mind” (in the marketing jargon) and the obvious superiority of the sweeter taste of Pepsi in blind taste tests), Coca Cola decided to formulate a sweeter cola drink which would be its own “taste of a new generation” while Classic Coke was relegated to a nostalgic positioning of being the “Original”. The effect was a marketing disaster for Coca Cola which almost lost its leadership of the Cola category and opened the door for the creation of a myriad of alternative ‘Soft drinks’ which challenged its previously impervious authenticity as the ‘Real Thing’.   Coca Cola had been led down this path by believing in the ‘reality’ of consumerism which research presented rather than recognising it as clever marketing myth making by their fleet of foot challenger brand.

The modern marketer is no different to the modern ‘financial services executive’, both of whom will always privilege “science” over other forms of more intuitive and common sense knowledge because that is the way that organisations have to make decisions. Presenting marketers with the ‘reality’ of liquid modern life, with its contradictions, compartments, blurred distinctions, competing narratives and messy decisions is equivalent bringing Newton personally up to date with the implications of the Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle.

There is an irony in this situation that often the very brands which are faced with this messy and confusing reality, themselves pre-date the modern invention of marketing and marketing science. Such brands in fact draw much of their authority from their linkages to that “pre-modern” historical context. Brands haven’t always been about ‘ideas’ and the progress of modernity. In fact many brands draw their strength from a lack of any perceptions of having been ‘invented’ as part of the march of technological development and progress. In these situations you find that consumers themselves become willing participants in the myth making which provides the brands with their authority within cultural praxis of ethically significant activities within the domestic context such as doing the laundry; laundry being a particular cultural praxis which has been set at the heart of maternal ethics and self image since the beginning of modern advertising.

Fabric conditioner is part of this world, and is what you might call a classic product of solid modern consumerism. The need for fabric conditioner is created by the presence of the product – prior to its addition you would not have felt that somehow your clothes were not cleaned and cared for to the best of your ability but after it is added the fragrance and softening effect make direct linkages to the ethical and moral motivations connected with 'being a good mum' as the feelings of love and care are manifested by the physical interactions and social responses prompted by the product. In essence, we use fabric conditioner to gain recognition of our role as a 'good mother' from other actors within the domestic/family sphere.

Fabric conditioner for home use was launched in the 1960's and yet there are a significant proportion of users for whom the reason for usage is that it is something 'traditional' which their grandmothers or mothers would have used, even if that would require the product to have effected some form of time travel to be true. Even a brand as mundane and simple as Vaseline is perceived by many respondents to be somehow 'natural and original' despite being a modern by-product of the industrial refining of gasoline. This is perhaps the essential paradox which sits at the heart of the modern consumer brand; the desire to achieve cultural authority by 'making memories' through the industrial process of repetition and mass communication which invoke an axiomatic 'originality' and attempts to transcend the system from which it was invented and produced. The kingdom of consumerism arguably is not one of ends or even means but 'origins' and constant're-invention'.

In the same way, our experience of modern, industrialised money as produced and distributed by banks and financial services institutions is presented as somehow being rooted not in a moment of human history, but somehow as intrinsic to our human reality. Imagining a world 'without money' (which was the subject of a number of documentaries and blogs during the period of crisis) was still imagined in terms of a capitalist economic system produced and controlled by modern financial institutions. The money in question was itself largely unquestioned, and merely its usage for consumption the thing being avoided. Even in the run up to the credit crunch, modern money was playing the games of the big consumer brands by appealing to an invented sense of nostalgia and comfort for a so-called 'golden age' of banking.

There have been a number of attempts to produce alternative 'money' (e.g. the Brixton Pound and initiatives by Transition Towns in Stroud and Totnes), but even these social enterprises seemed to be accepting of the idea that money itself, as enacted within our economic system, is somehow a physical necessity or utility like electricity. The only alternative from that point of view to find ways of using it which are 'green' or 'sustainable', but still inherently rooted in the role of money as the means to consumption. Hence, rather than looking at the ways money is produced and seeking alternative mechanisms for creating capital which themselves are inherently sustainable or even embedded within an alternative moral or social context, such initiatives are positioned as attempts to make consumers more aware of 'local' goods and to mollify the effects of their consumption by purchasing products manufactured or sourced closer to home.

8. Liquid Brands and 'producing' a sustainable society

The example of the resilience of Zopa combined with now public anxieties and crises of once powerful, self confident brands (that mirror our own crises as individuals cast adrift from the traditional anchors of authority and value) provides clues for new ways to approach the problem of creating a more sustainable society. Bauman's idea of Liquid Modernity can be read as a challenge for us to question the 'reality' of solid modern ideas, institutions and technologically driven "progress". Even in a summarised form, presenting Bauman within the boardroom context is always incendiary and provocative (or as Duvall characterised it, "sociological semtex").

In fact, "liquid brands" may provide a mechanism for the galvanising of the liquid modern individual towards collective moral action without recourse to the brutality of the solid modern vision of social "engineering". Zopa itself was pitched to its investors "eBay for money" because Zopa represented a new form of 'liquid brand' which didn't conform to the text book definitions of marketing science. Zopa, like eBay before it, was a brand which the establishment said 'would not work'. In the 21st Century, we now accept as normal that the world is increasingly dominated by brands whose meaning and even their very identity is a function of their community of customers more than the 'creativity' of their inventors.

Hilary Clinton, frustrated by the success of Obama's grass roots campaign, was quoted as saying "I think the best description actually is in Barack's own book, where he said that he is a blank screen and people of widely different views project what they want to hear, he just hasn't been around long enough. But with the blank screen it gives you a chance to just really infuse it with whatever you hope for, whatever you want without knowing." Such a statement, albeit from the next generation in the evolution of marketing, is reminiscent of Heath's criticism of Thatcher's use of the Saatchi brothers and their "cereal packet politics" and points perhaps to the coming of age of the liquid brand on such a high profile consumer stage – the US Presidential Primaries.

Obama may appeared to have turned his back on Moveon.org and what it represented but the lessons of liquid branding are now writ large for those who want to 'make change'. The power of such brands is that they provide a way of turning diffuse and individualised liquidity into political, cultural and in Zopa's case even economic capital. The difference is that rather than 'freezing' the liquid individuals in the ice of nostalgia for a golden age, they allow create the conditions for a degree of individual freedom of expression and determination of outcome (and even risk) moderated by a set of collective rules and principles by which the community is self “policed”.

Zopa was voted ‘most trusted financial institution’ in 2010, despite not being selected by the panel for the shortlist, because it is produced, in no small part, by the actions and individualised ethics of its members. Yes, there is a requirement for protecting individuals from exploitation, Bauman would clearly recognise that a compromise always needs to be made between freedom and security in any society, but Zopa’s role is merely to facilitate and at no point attempts to eliminate bad debt completely from the ‘reality’ of lending and borrowing. This contrasts strongly with the lengths companies like Lehman’s, RBS and Northern Rock went to so as to make their lending appear to defy economic gravity and produce returns based on risk assessments which assumed ‘no return to boom and bust’.

It is ironic that the mantra ‘remember that investments can go down as well as up’ which has become part of the “wallpaper” for many regulated financial institutions’ communications does not need to be applied to Zopa itself because it represents a model which is not itself regulated by the Financial Services Authority (and would require an act of Parliament to be so) and yet it is Zopa where returns have remained at a steady 8% since 2008 while the customers of regulated firms have suffered significant losses or been bailed out by state intervention and insurance.

The experience of Obama would suggest that the creators of “liquid brands” will always be presented with the trappings (literally and metaphorically) of solid modern power and institutions, whether in the form of commercial wealth or political office. However, there is real value in recognising that consumption is not just about material consumption and that a significant portion of the value and justification for consumption practices, particularly within the domestic context, are ethical, social and cultural in nature. Merely attacking the material inputs (and externalities) of such practices is perhaps counter-productive and may even increase consumption (by increasing the feelings of uncertainty which the search for meaning in the Malls and high streets is designed to ameliorate). Instead we need to create brands and experiences which make the meaning and experience of ‘living sustainably’ both enriching and tangible for the individual. There may well be no place for ethics in a “world of consumers”, at least as imagined by marketing science. However, there is an argument for creating a place where humans can take back ownership of their ethics by the production of new, intrinsically sustainable experiences of production and consumption and in doing so make a meaning of sustainability which is valuable and relevant to the individual.

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