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Coffee by women: the ‘duty of ethical enjoyment’

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the contemporary trend of deploying feminist values in the case of ethical branding. Using the psychoanalytical concepts logics of fantasy and enjoyment, we analyse the campaign by Swedish coffee brand Zoégas, Coffee by Women, to understand how a combination of development discourse, ‘women’s empowerment’ and the opportunity to ‘do good’ is employed to sell coffee. The analysis shows that the campaign depicts the threat of a future lack of coffee, creating anxiety in the consumer, supposedly motivating her to purchase Zoégas, as Coffee by Women is claimed to secure and educate new generations of coffee farmers. Simultaneously, this is presented as ‘empowering women’ in the global South. We argue that this narrative builds on a colonial fantasy of global sisterhood and shared interests that works to conceal the political conflicts connected to global trade and climate change. Through a commodification of feminist values and aesthetics, this fantasy works to redirect the desire for social change towards consumption, offering an enjoyable solution that disregards any wider responsibility. It has been argued that the structure of the social bond before the era of mass consumption was characterized by a prohibition on individual enjoyment for the benefit of the common good. After the arrival of mass consumption, the social bond instead became marked by a duty to enjoy. In the contemporary context of ethical capitalism, we suggest that the social bond is rather structured by a ‘duty of ethical enjoyment’, containing elements of both prohibition and pleasure.

KEYWORDS Feminism; ethical consumption; women’s empowerment; advertising; fantasy; duty of ethical enjoyment

In order to secure the future of coffee, Zoégas educates coffee farmers in sustainable growing, which gives better returns. Zoégas’ goal is that at least 30 per cent of those educated are women. Traditionally, they have not had the same opportunities in education as men. Everyone is needed to secure the future of coffee.¹

The quote above is part of the advertising campaign Coffee by Women by the Swedish coffee brand Zoégas, owned by the Nestlé Corporation. Among other
channels, the campaign is marketed through ads in magazines and online: YouTube videos and information on Zoégas’ website contain claims regarding education, sustainability, profit, women and gender (in)equality, all supposedly important components for the securing of future coffee. The campaign paints a picture of the threat of declining coffee production, especially quality coffee, whilst at the same time offering a solution, by alluding to women’s empowerment and sustainability. Through the appeal to buy Zoégas coffee, the consumer is invited to become part of a suggested win-win solution by both empowering (other) women and securing the consumer’s own enjoyment of good coffee in the future. This nexus of women’s empowerment and ethical consumption is the point of departure for this article, enabling an analysis of the affective dimensions of the neoliberalisation of feminism (Rottenberg 2013), the increasing interest in ‘conscience capitalism’ (cf. Farrel 2015) and ethical consumption.

Ethical consumption is a rapidly growing market niche within which an increasing number of brands promote themselves through values connected to social responsibility, sustainability and ‘doing good’ (cf. Littler 2009, Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012). This approach became especially prominent after the financial crises around 2008 (Roberts 2015). An increased emphasis on corporate social responsibility and philanthropic conduct by corporations emerged as an answer to the scepticism towards ‘global finance-led capitalism’ brought about by the financial crises. This also included a certain focus on women and feminist values, as women were regarded as a safer investment (Roberts 2015, 2016). Research on ethical consumption has been conducted within a wide range of disciplines with various perspectives; from economic or business studies on the impact of production conditions and growth potential (cf. Smith 2010, Griffiths 2012, Karjalainen and Moxham 2013), to aspects of consumer power/political consumerism (cf. Micheletti 2003, Micheletti and Stolle 2008), to the process of commodification (cf. Binkley 2008, Zick Varul 2008, Littler 2012). Ethical consumption has also been studied as a question of identity (cf. Hearn 2012, Wheeler 2012), as a form of ‘moral selving’ (Allahyari 2000), and as a means for both consumers and companies to represent themselves as ‘more virtuous’ agents (Barnett et al. 2005, see also Goodman 2004).

In the coffee industry, several corporations use various forms of ethical connotations in the branding of their products. In addition, there are numerous campaigns that make use of values connected to gender equality and women’s empowerment. This suggests a contemporary tendency to combine the notion of ‘ethical’ with ‘feminist’ or ‘women-friendly’ consumption. Aside from Zoégas, in 2017 the coffee brand Arvid Nordquist launched a Fairtrade-certified and ecologically produced coffee called ‘Amigas: Grown by Women’ onto the Swedish market, and the small-scale Karma Coffee sells a coffee called ‘Girl Power’ using the slogan ‘a taste for good people’.
In the UK, Equal Exchange\(^2\) and Taylors\(^3\) have employed similar branding strategies, adhering to discourses of gender equality and women’s empowerment.

In this article, we will explore the meaning and possible implications of this symbolic intersection between feminism, ethics and consumption by analysing how notions like ethical consumption, social change, and women’s emancipation are constructed and employed by the Zoégas project and its campaign Coffee by Women. In particular, we are interested in how Zoégas produces different forms of desire in its consumers, in what ‘imaginary’ (Goodman 2004) the company is trying to sell and how a need for these (symbolic) commodities is created, sustained and fuelled.

**In the context of women’s empowerment**

The entanglement of feminism and capitalist forces has been theorized and explored by various feminist scholars, among whom some argue that the contemporary discourse of gender equality, valorizing individual responsibility, self-esteem, and empowerment, has pioneered the ‘undoing of feminism’ (McRobbie 2009). This spirit of the time has been called postfeminism, suggesting that feminism is of little interest within a neoliberal context of individualism (Gill 2007, 2017). At the same time, in the twenty-first century feminism has become popular culture, a marketing strategy and a commodity (Goldman et al. 1991, McRobbie 2009, Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017). With Gill (2017, p. 612), we contend that a postfeminist logic may operate through ‘a celebration of (a certain kind of) feminism, rather than its repudiation’.

Nancy Fraser (2013, pp. 220–221) suggests that Western second-wave feminism has played a crucial role in the expansion of neoliberal capitalism, not least through the feminist critique of the family wage and women’s exclusion from the labour market. The definition of women’s emancipation at stake in this argument connects waged labour to liberation, which according to Fraser (2013, p. 240) has led to women’s liberation becoming intimately connected with capitalist growth (see also Roberts 2015). Fraser (2013, p. 225) claims that neoliberalism inflicts new ‘modes of domination’ over women in the guise of emancipation, a logic that has been absorbed into development discourse that aims to empower women in the Global South.\(^4\) Hester Eisenstein (2009, 2005) makes similar claims, highlighting how contemporary hegemonic liberal feminism, taking its departure in white, middle-class women’s prerequisites and equating freedom with paid labour, has enabled the exploitation of women in free-trade zones in the Global South. In the field of international development,\(^5\) the mainstreaming of what Eisenstein (2009) calls hegemonic feminism has led to an increasingly common connection being made between gender equality and economic development amongst
nongovernmental organizations, foreign aid agencies, and organizations like the World Bank (Cornwall and Brock 2005, Eyben and Naipier-Moore 2009, Roberts 2015, Eisenstein 2017). As Fraser (2013, p. 240) notes, the intersection between neoliberal capitalist discourse and women’s emancipation makes phenomena like micro-credit seem like a self-evident good. The empowerment of women in developing countries is referred to as ‘smart economics’, and is increasingly motivated by reasons of economic growth, rather than by women’s rights or justice as ends in themselves (Chant and Sweetman 2012, Roberts 2015, see also Eisenstein 2017).

The connection made in the development field between economic growth, sustainability, and women’s emancipation has also been integrated into the business sector, in particular through branding strategies built on corporate social responsibility (Chant and Sweetman 2012). Roberts (2015) coined the term ‘transnational business feminism’ to underline the current profitability of gender equality. This trend may risk turning corporations into ‘gender experts’, thus becoming the primary producers and distributors of knowledge on gender and development issues. In addition, the feminist perspectives endorsed by the business sector typically encompass an essentialist understanding of gender, with little regard for structural explanations of inequality or poverty. This in turn, argues Roberts, disarms decades of feminist critique and reproduces the hegemonic position of the neoliberal market economy.

The initiative Coffee by Women fits well into this picture. As a campaign targeting Swedish women supposedly intrigued by the feminist twist, a corporate social responsibility strategy, and a development project, Coffee by Women raises questions about the neoliberalisation of political movements as well as international development – and, our primary concern, the profitability of political and moral discourse in marketing. Arguably, Zoégas offers the consumer not only an enjoyable coffee product, but also the moral enjoyment of contributing to the emancipation of female coffee farmers in East Africa, thus buying into ‘a better world’.

Apart from a sense that ethical consumption has become a common trait of contemporary marketing, this study is also fuelled by the notion that the political implications of such a tendency have not been thoroughly studied. Particularly scarce are empirical studies with a psychoanalytical discourse perspective. This study should thus be understood as picking up the gauntlet thrown down by Stavrakakis (2007) in his call for researchers to highlight ‘the exact mechanisms underlying this articulation between politics and consumerism and the increasing hegemonization of our societies by the discourses of advertising, public relations and consumption’ (Stavrakakis 2007, p. 231). Similarly, Gill (2017, p. 620) has remarked that we need an analysis not only of the cultural forms of postfeminism, but also of its ‘affective and psychic life’. The neoliberalisation of feminism, like capitalism, has a ‘structure of feeling’ (cf. Williams 1961, in Gill 2017, p. 620). Starting from this, we are,
above all, interested in how feminist values and moral actions are made into a desired commodity.

The aim of this article is twofold. Firstly, we will critically scrutinize the narratives Zoégas tells about its products and production in order to understand the forces that make intelligible the entanglement of feminism, ethics and consumption. Secondly, we will deliberate on the political implications of this specific conflation of marketing and ethico-political values. How does the idea of ethical consumption affect publicly affirmed norms and ideals, as well as political critique? What kind of actions and what kind of social change become intelligible and desirable when you can ‘make a difference’ by drinking coffee? By stating our aim, we want to stress that this study will not engage in assessing whether Zoégas’ initiative *Coffee by Women* improves the working conditions of coffee producers. Rather, we will approach aspects of consumer desire and their political and ethical implications.

**Fantasy, enjoyment and consumption**

Slavoj Žižek (1989) asserts that advertising is both a manifestation of the current order and at the same time supports that particular order. Hence, advertising plays a substantial role in the (re)production of ideology and subjects, as well as in shaping norms, identities and behaviour in a capitalist system. By interpreting and creating meaning through a specific piece of advertising, we are drawn into its systems of meaning, which subsequently shape us (Williamson 1978).

Consequently, we believe that market discourse on ‘doing good’ contributes to a hegemonic understanding of moral behaviour, shaping political subjectivities and framing what constitutes ethical or political action (cf. Barnett et al. 2005). Following this, we will analyse the ways in which political critique of the hegemonic order is taken up by advertising strategies, and subsequently how this affects the meaning of social change and political subjectivities. When consumerism impinges upon politics and social arenas, one might suggest that it also alters interpersonal relations (Stavrakakis 2007, p. 230). It is precisely this re-articulation and de-stabilization of concepts like gender equality and doing good that are at the core of this paper.

To meet our aim, we turn to theories of psychoanalysis, and more specifically to the concept of fantasmatic logics (Glynos and Howarth 2007). The concept of fantasmatic logics provides analytical tools to capture why certain practices resonate with subjects, and what constitutes the force in those practices (Glynos and Howarth 2007, p. 145). What is it in those tropes that makes them so appealing? In other words, we want to grasp how subjects are drawn into and made complicit in the fantasmatic narratives told by ethical/feminist advertising (Glynos and Howarth 2007, p. 134). The notion of fantasy should not be understood as an illusion giving the subject
a false perception of the world, but rather as something that veils or subdues the political aspects of a specific practice (Glynos and Howarth 2007, p. 145). Fantasies shape conflicts in ways that make them seem natural and thereby difficult to reveal (cf. Howarth 2010).

To identify fantasmatic narratives in the campaign material, we will look in particular for two characteristics. Firstly, fantasmatic narratives often provide a logical coherence to contradictory elements, thus creating ‘an impossible union between incompatible elements’ (Glynos and Howarth 2007, p. 147). Secondly, a fantasmatic narrative may be identified by examining ‘whether or not it resists public official disclosure’ (Glynos and Howarth 2007, p. 148, italics in original).

In analysing fantasmatic narratives, we will furthermore engage with a Lacanian understanding of enjoyment and how it relates to ‘doing good’ and women’s empowerment. Adhering to this approach, we understand the subject as a subject of lack due to the inherent limitations of language, meaning that the symbolic order structuring the psyche, and the imaginary providing the subject with an image of self and other, can never capture our whole identity (Lacan 1977). This constitutive lack in the subject gives rise to a sense of lost enjoyment, which in turn produces a desire for wholeness. The subject tries to cover its lack through identification with different available object causes of desire, such as acts of consumption (Stavrakakis 2011, p. 69). However, this Lacanian logic builds upon the assumption that the lack within the subject can never be satisfied, and hence the object cause of desire escapes or changes once the subject receives it (Lacan 1993, pp. 179–180). Fantasy thus serves to cover the inherent lack, yet sustains the promise of wholeness; accordingly, it structures desire (Glynos 2011, p. 72).

Examining the fantasmatic narratives in our material allows for an understanding of the values of social change produced and the desires utilized in this particular advertising strategy. Ethical consumerism is not only a commodity that will produce enjoyment in the act of buying, it also promises a surplus value that boosts the act of consumption. This surplus value lies in the promise that the act of buying may also offer something to others, which enhances the pleasure of consumption (Littler 2009). This enjoyment may include the possibility for the consumer in the Global North to obtain redemption for previous colonial ‘sins’ (Fontenelle 2010); in our case, a sense of aiding in the empowerment of other women.

As Stavrakakis (2007, p. 227) contends, branding and advertising offer a perfect example of how social and political structures can be reformed by new interpellations, thereby altering identities as well as conduct. Consumerism, being one of the hegemonic discourses in our society today, confirms our identity as primarily consumers. Therefore, advertisements can dislocate hegemonic discourses on ethics and what it means to ‘do good’, shaping our understanding of different signifiers such as equality, feminism or
activism. By engaging with logics of fantasy, we will show how the desire for ethical consumption is motivated by fantasies deployed in advertising, and how such fantasies are maintained by the enjoyment necessitated by desiring consumption of both the commodities and the ads themselves (Stavrakakis 2007, p. 228).

**Coffee by women – the campaign**

In order to answer our research questions, we will analyse the campaign material developed by Zoégas, marketing the company’s sustainability work through the project *Coffee by Women*. Founded in 1881, Zoégas is a well-known coffee brand among Swedish consumers, owned since 1986 by Nestlé Sweden. Nestlé is a multinational corporation and one of the largest food companies in the world. As such, it has been questioned and critiqued due to various dubious actions over the years, most notably the baby milk scandal in the 1970s. Nestlé was accused of promoting its baby milk formula using ethically questionable methods, primarily targeting poor women in developing countries, which led to a transnational boycott (Sasson 2016). Since then, Nestlé has invested a vast amount of money in the area of corporate social responsibility. Nestlé today presents its business as committed to the principle of *Creating Shared Value*; i.e. creating value for stakeholders as well as focusing on sustainability, community development, health and nutrition. The project *Coffee by Women* is presented by Nestlé Sweden as an example of best practice in this field.

*Coffee by Women* is similarly described by Zoégas as an initiative for sustainable coffee production which, since 2011, has offered education to farmers in Kenya and Rwanda in sustainable and effective production, quality improvement and certification. Both men and women take part in the programme, but women are offered additional training in leadership, confidence building and self-development, as one stated goal is to increase the number of female coffee farmers in leading positions. The short-term goal is that 30 per cent of the farmers participating in the project should be women. In terms of marketing, the project *Coffee by Women* is referred to primarily as a quality marker of Zoégas’ whole supply, and only by way of exception as a description of a specific product.

The advertising campaign is made up of a variety of materials: information pages on the official Zoégas website, texts, banners and pictures from and about the project and its (suggested) positive effects, as well as YouTube videos, ads and a special Christmas coffee, explicitly containing ‘coffee by women’. Zoégas has also engaged four Swedish ‘lifestyle’ bloggers to reach out to its audience. Together with Zoégas, the bloggers visited farmers in Kenya who are participating in the project ‘to get a closer look at the results of Coffee by Women’; as Zoégas phrases it. Some of these
meetings are staged and presented in three YouTube videos, available on the Zoégas website, in which the bloggers interview female Kenyan coffee farmers. A music video has also been produced and is available on Zoégas’ YouTube channel. In cooperation with a female Kenyan singer, Alicios Theluji, Zoégas has translated a well-known Swedish feminist activist song from the 1970s, ‘Vi måste höja våra röster’, into Swahili (‘Lazima upandishe sauti ili uskiike’, in English: ‘We have to raise our voices’), originally performed by the band Röda Bönor (‘Red Beans’). Sponsored by Zoégas, the video – and the project – has been promoted by a number of additional female Swedish bloggers through links and articles on their respective blogs. The analysis that follows will focus on the four YouTube videos and selected aspects of the general information about the project presented on the Zoégas website.

**Coffee in the future: threats and enjoyment**

‘Everyone is needed to secure the future of coffee’, Zoégas states not once but twice in the introductory headline to the three YouTube interviews with female Kenyan coffee farmers conducted by Swedish bloggers. Similar expressions recur throughout the material, suggesting that the coffee industry, and the consumer’s own cup of coffee, is under threat. Zoégas frequently uses the word ‘sustainability’ to describe the project, a development ‘buzzword’ (cf. Cornwall and Brock 2005, Roberts 2015), which also implies the risk of a non-sustainable future.

We argue that the campaign is built upon the construction of a future threat, presented as a potential theft of the consumer’s enjoyment, to which the campaign presents a fantasmatic solution (cf. Žižek 1993). In a quite literal manner, the campaign makes use of the fact that desire and the anticipation of enjoyment are most easily produced through the construction of a lack. Stavrakakis states: ‘Only by staging a scenario of lack can fantasy move on to its promise of covering over this lack in some distant or not so distant future – only thus can the fantasmatic promise sound appealing’ (2007, p. 241). The subject’s desire is (re)directed, through this particular framing of lack and solution, from the possibility of a structural analysis and change, to an object seemingly closer to hand: Zoégas coffee, making the political subject first and foremost a consuming individual.

Zoégas connects the threat of declining coffee production to climate change and new environmental conditions for farming, but also to a potential lack of competent and willing coffee farmers. In the introductory text on the project’s website, the efforts of Coffee by Women are said to ‘enable continued farming as well as a more secure livelihood’ that will ‘secure the coffee farmers of the future’. Zoégas also motivates its particular investment in women with the argument that women tend to make more long-term investments ‘in the
farming, their workers, their family, or some side-line job to strengthen the income of the household’ (cf. Roberts 2015).

In the campaign, Zoégas suggests both a problem and a solution, inviting the consumer to participate in the latter. Thinking about advertising as an important arena for the production of ideology in a capitalist society, and ideology as both ‘a discursive response’ to criticism of ‘the wastefulness of capitalism’ and a simultaneous attempt to defend and maintain the current system (Thompson 2012, p. 896), the tone of this campaign is highly arresting. By presenting a vague threat of climate change, without going into more disturbing details of things like capitalist exploitation or environmental disasters, the campaign seems to wish to gently remind the consumer of the negative effects of climate change on coffee production. This reminder should ideally lead the consumer into a specific form of anxiety, and produce a desire to buy more coffee. The ‘awareness’ that is both sought and produced in the ad campaign is not an appreciation and understanding of the causes of climate change, but a narrower one, shaped to fit what Stacy Thompson calls ‘capitalism’s own fantasy of an ethical, eco-conscious capitalism’ (2012, p. 899). The fantasy being marketed is that the risk of a lack of coffee can be solved through an increased consumption of that same commodity (Thompson 2012, p. 902). As Glynos and Howarth (2007, p. 147) point out, this is characteristic of a fantasmatic logic working to make conflicting elements appear consistent.

Part of this appeal, cultivating both anxiety and desire in the campaign’s Swedish audience, is in effect the construction of responsibility. Apart from making this responsibility a question of the consumer’s choice of coffee, the campaign and project Coffee by Women specifically connect the threat of a future lack of coffee with the coffee producers’ capacity and desire to stay in the industry. The aim of the project Coffee by Women is primarily to educate the coffee farmers of Kenya and Rwanda so that they are willing and able to continue in the business, meet the demands of climate change, and increase their output. Under the headline ‘Education Coffee Farmers – Focus Women’, on the webpage presenting the YouTube videos, Zoégas states that ‘all coffee farmers [participating in the programme] are offered free training in sustainable and effective coffee farming, quality upgrade, verification and certification’, all this in order to ‘increase the supply of quality coffee and subsequently the families’ income’. The YouTube clip further states that:

In addition, women are offered training in leadership, confidence building and self-development. The whole family is needed to secure the future of coffee! Women and men are trained together. We want to include as many farmers as possible on the journey towards the coffee of the future, which is why we need to include more women and youth!11
Within this framework, the issue of ‘secur[ing] the future of coffee’ is positioned as a mutual interest for Swedish consumers and coffee farmers in East Africa alike. By presenting training in more effective and sustainable farming methods, especially for ‘women and youth’, as the solution to coffee decline, Zoéga states that what is to be secured is not only the future of coffee – but also new generations of coffee farmers in East Africa. The threat presented in the campaign is not only climate change per se, but a lack of skilled workers, and the ‘risk’ that the children of today’s coffee farmers will choose other professions. As Zoéga puts it, ‘the whole family is needed’. The need for a new generation is also clearly stated in one of the YouTube interviews, in which a female farmer who is encouraging her daughters to take over the business is presented as a good example. This rhetoric and imagination about what the ‘new generations’ are willing and able to do for their livelihood is strikingly colonial, making it practically a moral duty for the coffee farmers to remain in their position as producers of primary products for global trade and to raise their children to hold the same ambitions. The educational programme adds to the construction of the individual producer’s responsibility towards the market, building on a discourse typical of the neoliberal economy: the duty to invest in oneself as a way of enhancing one’s own ‘human capital’ (Brown 2015, Gill 2017). While the campaign builds on a rhetoric of women’s liberation and freedom through education, the hope expressed by the project is indeed a very limited version of ‘emancipation’ for the female coffee farmers: staying in the industry, hopefully making a bit more money as they learn to produce better quality coffee, and becoming more competitive. The spirit of the campaign is framed as progressive, but in practice it primarily consists of keeping the coffee farmers within their trade by helping to improve productivity, instead of augmenting and supporting the farmers’ intellectual and educational development, or their moral and political imagination, which are arguably more important components of social change (cf. Spivak 2004). In fact, the gist of the campaign is social immobility.

This redirection of responsibility for the depicted threat – the end of coffee – is strengthened by the problem description in the YouTube videos, which focuses on an assumed lack of gender equality in Kenya and Rwanda, where ‘women traditionally have not been taking part in coffee production’. Subsequently, encouraging more women (and youth) to participate in coffee production is presented as the ‘modern’ solution. The risk of a lack of coffee – the threat to ‘our’ future enjoyment – is made not into a problem about climate change, but primarily a question of ‘their’ lack, in this case their lack of modern values of gender equality and individual prosperity. Presenting the project as an initiative for the (female) coffee farmers, adhering to a narrative of women’s empowerment through labour as discussed further below, the campaign effectively obscures the structural relationship
between the coffee farmers, the company and the coffee consumers, as well as the uneven global distribution of climate effects. We argue that the campaign – in direct contrast to its claimed ambitions – in this way disregards the responsibility and economic position of the Swedish (coffee) consumer and the role of Zoégas and Nestlé as international food corporations. On the one hand, the object sold, the commodity, is not only the actual coffee but, through the moral imaginary of threats and solutions presented, also the opportunity to ‘save’ both the (female) coffee farmers and the consumer’s own future enjoyment of coffee. Closely connected to this is the act of ethical consumption as a potential space for ‘moral selving’ and not only the enjoyment involved in getting the object you want, but also the pleasure in becoming the subject you want to be (Barnett et al. 2005, Thompson 2012, p. 907). On the other hand, the truly devastating effects of climate change (other than a lack of coffee in Swedish food stores) are completely overlooked, as well as the Swedish consumer’s collaboration in this process. In fact, the moral statement of the campaign is the opposite of this; it is the coffee farmers’ potential unwillingness to continue in the industry, as well as their lack of competence and modern values, that comprise the biggest threats to our coffee consumption. The guilt and responsibility to change is theirs. The educational programme offered is presented as a gift, a good deed from Zoégas and the consumer, but it should rather be understood as a demand, reinstating colonial relations of control and enjoyment. This underlying conflict is disguised by a fantasmatic narrative of ‘ethical’ consumption and a sense of humanitarianism. This enables the consumer, interpellated by the campaign, to ignore her desire for enjoyment while still giving in to it, and implicitly prioritizes the consumer’s future access to coffee over a more thorough emancipation for (female) Kenyan and Rwandan coffee farmers (cf. Kapoor 2013). The pleasure in giving the ‘gift’ of buying into a better world is not explicitly mentioned in the campaign – such a statement would shatter the illusion of altruism – but is in fact effectively used to promote Zoégas products.

Simultaneously, the relationship between the project of empowering female coffee farmers and the coffee industry is presented as one of equality. Zoégas’ Nordic marketing manager, interviewed on the Zoégas YouTube channel, describes the project as a ‘win-win solution’ in face of the threat of declining coffee production; the relationship ‘secures’ the Swedish roastery Zoégas’ access to coffee beans, and the coffee farmers’ livelihoods. This colonial fantasy of what ‘our’ economic growth can offer ‘them’ is made legitimate not least through the individual success stories presented on the project’s website and in the YouTube videos. In the latter, an imagined equality between producer and consumer is stressed by the staging: two women are sitting in chairs facing each other, a female Swedish blogger (or, in one case, a heterosexual couple) asks a farmer about the project’s positive effects and her thoughts about the future. The setting suggests a personal
conversation on equal terms, demonstrating that ‘our’ trade with ‘them’ is contributing to their development, and that producer and consumer are in an equal, fair relationship.

As stated above, Zoéga claims to be investing in women not only to involve ‘the whole family’ and secure a new generation of coffee farmers, but also because women, due to ‘traditional values’ which are criticized in other parts of the campaign, are assumed to be more responsible and family-oriented, thus specifically redirecting the responsibility for meeting the threat onto women. Again, a conflictual and contradictory line of reasoning is covered by a fantasmatic narrative, specifically a narrative of women’s emancipation, their role in the community, and perceived sisterhood (cf. Glynos and Howarth 2007, p. 145).

Fantasy of global sisterhood

In this section, we will examine how the narratives articulate values connected to feminism, gender equality and social change. We argue that there are two main fantasmatic narratives at play here. On the one hand, Zoéga is painting a romanticized story of second-wave feminist sisterhood. On the other hand, the screenplay in the music video and the campaign text material articulate values of women’s empowerment and liberation through waged labour and entrepreneurialism. These two narratives constitute what we call the fantasy of global sisterhood.

The song and music video produced for Coffee by Women, ‘Lazima upandishé sauti ili uskiike’ (‘We have to raise our voices’), is a cultural hallmark of second-wave feminism in Sweden, which we interpret as having been chosen by Zoéga for the purpose of connecting its product to the enjoyment of participating in a feminist collective, primarily targeting the female Swedish consumer.

The screenplay of the music video is set in different milieus in what may be presumed to be a sub-Saharan context. The first scene conveys a gloomy mode, with black birds taking off into a darkish sky, under which a young woman is doing household work, braiding the hair of a child and doing laundry. In another scene, a schoolgirl sits in a noisy classroom where she receives no attention from the teacher. A third scene portrays a young woman being harassed by men in the street, after which a woman who later turns out to be a successful entrepreneur rescues her. As the video goes on and the music picks up, everyone starts to smile; the first protagonist throws off her apron, the second girl ‘performs’ in school, while the third young woman plays happily with the men who had previously been harassing her. Following this, all the characters, both men and women, move forward together, led by a group of women, towards what we understand to be education and prosperity. The video ends with the headline: ‘Zoéga continually
works towards educating more Kenyan women in sustainable coffee production.’

The story told by the images is closely connected to a discourse of women’s liberation through education and waged labour. The story also connects to a colonial narrative on development; the empowering and saving of women in the Global South through an expansion of the capitalist market and the creation of economic growth (Fraser 2013). Such neoliberal and colonial narratives can also be traced in the text material on Coffee by Women’s webpages: ‘Coffee by Women creates thousands of female entrepreneurs in the coffee industry. Our education greatly increases the number of female coffee producers in leading positions’ and ‘The women are also offered education in leadership, confidence building and self-development.’

The virtue of self-improvement through confidence building is a common trait of the postfeminist sensibility, argues Gill (2017, 2007), coinciding with the neoliberal economy’s focus on individual ‘makeover’ as the key to social and economic development. Importantly, the Coffee by Women campaign builds upon this logic in two different, but interconnected, ways, directing the imperative of self-improvement towards both the consumer and the producer. While the latter, as we have seen, is the target of the ‘empowering’ leadership programme and the duty to self-invest (but to stay put in the coffee industry), the consumer is encouraged towards self-development by means of ‘moral selving’ through ethical consumption. The conflation of feminist and ethical branding strategies seen in this campaign, building on both a neoliberal development discourse and popular feminism, suggests that a moralizing tone from the neoliberal economy can be directed towards both consumers and producers, and, as such, utilized to spur a desire for a specific product. The consumer is encouraged to better herself by contributing to the development of an imagined ‘sister’.

In connecting a neoliberal discourse of development through entrepreneurialism and education, Zoégas is making an appeal to its consumers based on a particular fantasmatic and colonial logic: when buying their coffee, the Swedish consumer is invited to be part of social change and to ‘do good’ by empowering women in Kenya and Rwanda. In that sense, this fantasmatic narrative of empowerment is constituted by neoliberal values of entrepreneurialism, and a liberal feminist discourse of waged labour as a means to acquire economic independence. Furthermore, the fantasmatic narrative also builds upon and reinforces a colonial discourse of development. It suggests that economic development (initiated from the Global North) is the key to empowering women, and that such development starts from one point in time and space and follows a universal line of constant forward progression. This reproduces a linear view of development, where the Global South is understood as having been ‘left behind’ (cf. Mohanty 2003), and in need of guidance from more advanced regions.
Even though this individualized neoliberal version of empowerment is often used in contemporary advertising (cf. Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012), the explicit use of a second-wave feminist aesthetics is, to the best of our knowledge, not common. The combination of the feminist song from the 1970s and the screenplay portraying entrepreneurialism and individual empowerment is a striking example of what McRobbie (2009) calls ‘the undoing of feminism’. In a context where feminism equates with individual strength and entrepreneurial success, feminist struggles in the Global North become a nostalgic thing of the past, something that we can now offer the ‘Other’ women in the Global South. By producing an affective attachment to other women – ‘our’ global sisters – this campaign produces a logic that tells female Swedish consumers that the more coffee you buy, the more you will help.

Joan Wallach Scott uses the term fantasy echo to capture both the specificity of temporal identifications and ‘how we appeal to and write history’ (2011, p. 46). Scott applies the concept to discuss identity and feminist history, but we argue that her description of fantasy echo is equally applicable in framing the deployment of feminist history in the Coffee by Women campaign. Scott’s understanding of fantasy echo is also helpful in understanding more about the affective dimensions of contemporary popular feminism (cf. Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017), and its ‘market value’. An echo, Scott (2011, p. 48) argues, is an iteration of the past, but not an exact copy of the original, as the echo returns in a slightly different form and with a slightly different meaning. Through a succession of reiterations, a fantasy echo ‘work[s] to conceal or minimize difference through repetition’ (Scott 2011, p. 53). In this case, the concealment is achieved by repeating this particular hallmark song that connotes values of community, strength, and women’s liberation, and as such obscures the differences among women. At the same time, the concealment of the fantasy echo enhances the enjoyment of (buying into) solidarity through providing the idea of common ground. In animating a historical and retrospective enjoyment (i.e. nostalgia), a fellowship or sense of community is evoked between Swedish women and women in East Africa. A historical narrative of solidarity is used to build communities that traverse ‘the boundaries of difference that separate physical females from one another within cultures, between cultures, and across time’ (Scott 2011, p. 66). This, in turn, enhances the fantasy of global sisterhood.

By deploying a particular historical feminist narrative, Zoégas is fortifying a sense of sisterhood and proximity, which in this case bolsters the enjoyment of doing good. By using a narrative that taps into collective feminist struggles, the music video creates affective investment in the act of buying as a collective practice, a movement, fuelling a sense of togetherness and solidarity for social change. We maintain that the values of feminism and political struggle deployed by Zoégas in this campaign are merely an aesthetic element
deployed to enhance viewers’ affective investment in a fantastmatic narrative of global sisterhood, increasing their inclination to buy coffee. Zoégas is thereby redirecting a desire for community, sisterhood and social change into an act of consumption: buy the story, buy the product. As with most ‘market-based production and reproduction of feminist politics’, a social problem is recognized and used to gain attention, without ‘recognising, naming, or disrupting the political economic conditions that allow that [problem] to be profitable’ (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017, p. 886).

The fantasy of global sisterhood is also evident in the interviews conducted by the female lifestyle bloggers. In emulating the narrative techniques of the documentary genre, the interviews give a sense of interpersonal connection and confession, arguably producing stronger effects of authenticity, sincerity, and truth than a traditional commercial. In one of the videos, a blogger summarizes her interview and connects her own experience with what has been said: ‘I myself am working as a female leader and this [the project] has been close to my heart. Because what it comes down to is educating women to be even more powerful leaders’. With its setting of a one-to-one conversation, and the interviewer’s desire to relate her life to those depicted, the interview also works to establish a sense of sharing, as though the women were part of a community. The affective sharing of the experience of being a woman is in line with the second-wave feminist tradition of consciousness-raising (Koivunen 2009), creating the potential for a notion of common ground and equality between women, and subsequently producing ‘a sense of globally shared experience of gender’ (Koivunen 2009, p. 4). The interviews appeal to both personal experience and a white, colonizing gaze: the (white) bloggers’ accounts offer proximity to the Kenyan women, their experiences and emotions, producing a sense of truth, familiarity, community and a non-exploitative context. In line with the reasoning of Koivunen (2009, p. 5), this can be understood as mere confirmation of gender identity through aesthetic association (references to the second-wave feminist song and consciousness-raising) without any dialogue with radical feminist agendas, thus obscuring unequal and differentiated gendered and colonial relations. The feminism being sold is a ‘postfeminism’, feeding on a fantasy of positivity, freedom, and change that can be achieved without any conflicts of interest or angry feelings (Gill 2016).

As shown above, the neoliberal and colonial narrative told in the music video is interwoven with second-wave feminist aesthetics and a narrative of sisterhood, which we argue also help to draw possibly sceptical feminist consumers into its logic. As Stavrakakis (2007, p. 250) asserts, even those who are no longer fooled by the enjoyment of ‘straightforward’ consumption are interpellated in ways that make consumption seem to be something else, almost a form of resistance, that gives the consumer even more enjoyment. However,
the second-wave feminist narrative also works in ways that exceed its aesthetic markers by fuelling a desire for a nostalgic fantasy of global sisterhood.

Turning to the logics of fantasy, we argue that what is at play here is a global fantasy of sisterhood, veiling racial, class-based, national privileges and exploitation. A fantasy is, by definition, something that can never be achieved and thus it conceals conflict, pushing the political aspects into the background and avoiding official public contestation. Fantasmatic narratives also work to link incompatible elements into a logical chain, making more capitalism and more consumption the ‘logical’ response to the political questions of women’s subordination and the threat of climate change. As consumers invited to buy into the fantasy of global sisterhood, we know that buying coffee will not change the world order but, through being given the opportunity to enjoy the sense of making a small difference, the desire for change is sustained.

The use of a combination of feminist narratives and values of empowerment through global economics constitute what could be called commodity feminism (Goldman et al. 1991). Feminism as a political movement here becomes a commodity infused by the fantasy of global sisterhood, appealing to its consumers with an opportunity to both do good and feel good. In a contemporary society imbued with individualism, Zoégas commodifies the enjoyment of collectivity by deploying the enjoyment of political resistance, collective struggle and political participation, and thereby redirects the consumer’s political and ethical desires towards consumption. The fantasmatic narrative allows for the enjoyment of achieving social change through buying more coffee. We agree though with Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2017), who argue that the contemporary ‘traffic in feminism’ is not only about commodification, but is also a partial recognition of inequality, as stated above. Typical of the postfeminist zeitgeist, this recognition is not followed by any further structural critique, as it serves another purpose. Importantly, the partial recognition of injustice in postfeminist discourse echoes the uncanny presence of the threat of climate disaster in the Coffee by Women campaign, adding to the consumer’s feeling that ‘something has to be done’ – causing a desire to buy the product, while keeping a ‘positive’ attitude.

Conclusions: duty of ethical enjoyment and a new direction for desire

In a political economic context where neoliberal capitalism is regarded as the only possible provider of development and freedom, ethical consumption and market-based solutions become the logical path to social change. Likewise, capitalism seems to have an extraordinary ability to absorb criticism and transform it into marketable values (cf. Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). Building on feminist critiques of this development, in this article we have explored why
and how the conflation between politics and consumerism becomes an effective branding strategy through its affective grip on the subject. As Žižek (1989) has noted, capitalist ideology ‘doesn’t have to brainwash us to be effective’, as the ‘conscious’ consumer might find just as much pleasure in thinking that he or she has exposed the system as in buying a product (Kapoor 2013, p. 11).

Coffee by Women constitutes a particularly interesting example of ethical branding, appealing to the attractiveness of feeling morally superior, as well as to a feeling of proximity to the producer and the possible enjoyment of joining forces in the face of a future threat. The problem to be solved is presented not primarily as the poverty of others, but as a joint concern about a shared interest in the sustainable production of coffee. Likewise, the use of hegemonic liberal feminist trademarks, such as the importance of women’s empowerment, shares many qualities with other commercial expressions of feminism. While previous research has shown that the latter tend to focus on the female consumer and her individual self-development, self-confidence and self-care, we wish to suggest that a postfeminist sensibility (Gill 2007, 2017) finds it equally possible to take the shape of a collective feminist struggle, borrowing its form from the memory of community. The temporality embedded in the advertising material of Coffee by Women suggests that, when individuality is a highly valued property, equated with modern development, community becomes a thing of the past. The values of collectivity and sisterhood are rejected, yet reappear as a bittersweet desire, which it is possible to invoke in the campaign as a nostalgic echo.

In addition, through visual representations of farm visits, personal confessions by farmers and blog interviews, the campaign adds to the fantasy of global sisterhood with notions of journalistic transparency, truth telling, intimacy and non-mediated relations. This produces a sense of equality between consumer and farmer, which might be read as a response to the common critique of capitalist exploitation (Zick Varul 2008), whilst at the same time offering the enjoyment of ‘moral selving’ (Allahyari 2000), in contributing to other women’s emancipation. Altogether, this re-orientates the subject’s object cause of desire towards consumption, reducing the meaning of both political action and sisterhood to ‘friendly’ market relations.

Furthermore, we suggest that the attraction of both ethical and feminist consumption must be seen in relation to the very structure of the social bond. On this note, Stavrakakis (2007)16 charts a historical shift in capitalism, arguing that the structure of society has altered from a ‘society of prohibition’ to a ‘society of commanded enjoyment’. The former, dominant before the introduction of mass consumption, was characterized by a work ethic of discipline and sacrifice (Bauman 1998). Central to the ‘society of prohibition’, in effect a social duty, was the postponing of personal enjoyment for the benefit of the community. A society of ‘commanded enjoyment’ is instead characterized
by a ‘duty to enjoy’, to maximize one’s own immediate pleasure (Stavrakakis 2007, pp. 246–248). A similar duty to be happy imbues much of the postfeminist sensibility, focusing on the importance of self-confidence, self-care, and individual freedom (Gill 2017).

However, the material analysed in this article does not seem to fit neatly within either of these social structures. Rather, we want to suggest that, in Coffee by Women, as well as in other forms of ethical branding, these two have transformed into what we call a ‘duty of ethical enjoyment’. The subject is still interpellated with a demand to enjoy, to keep buying products for her own pleasure, but unrestrained enjoyment is restricted – prohibited – by incorporating a component of also enjoying for the social good, for others. An extra element of pleasure is thus sold by Zoégas, by connecting its product to a moral sphere of regulation. This move, which in psychoanalytical terms could be described as a sublimation of desire, adds an aura of self-sacrifice to the act of consumption, offering the consumer the enjoyable feeling of performing an altruistic deed (cf. Freud 1961, p. 49, Žižek 2003).

Reading Coffee by Women through the notion of a ‘duty of ethical enjoyment’ helps to explain the attraction of this particular branding strategy. Coffee by Women construes a contradictory feeling, acknowledging and confirming two edictal ideals at once. The campaign makes use of a dominant discourse that valorizes individualism, through its celebration of entrepreneurialism and women’s empowerment, whilst at the same time commanding enjoyment through a nostalgic echo of sisterhood. This conflation ties the subject even closer to market logic, seemingly offering individual prosperity as well as the feeling of community.

Notes

4. Even though some of the scholars we draw upon use other concepts, we choose to use the concepts of the Global South and Global North to stress the importance of ‘geopolitical relations of power’ rather than stages of development (Dados and Connell 2012). The terms should be understood in light of ‘an entire history of colonialism, neo-imperialism, and differential economic and social change through which large inequalities in living standards, life expectancy, and access to resources are maintained’ (ibid.).
5. ‘Development’ is a much-debated phrase, and we use it to describe the heterogeneous industry of, for example, foreign aid, non-governmental organizations, state- or corporate-funded programmes as well as programmes and funds issued by supranational bodies like the UN, IMF and the World Bank, all aiming in different ways to strengthen primarily economic growth, but also human rights, gender quality and environmental sustainability, in so-called developing countries.
9. ‘Bönor’ is also a slang word for women.

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