



## Ethical commodities as exodus and refusal\*

Robbie Fordyce and Luke van Ryn

### abstract

At the same time as brands and branding dominate our contemporary mode of capitalism, brands also claim an ethical position based on a critique of their competitors (Lury, 2004; Arvidsson, 2006). This paper hopes to contribute to the understanding of 'ethical brands' from an autonomist Marxist perspective by showing that, although ethical claims do not offer a way out of capitalism, they do begin to assemble an alternative mode of production. The autonomist concepts of 'exodus' and 'refusal' (Tronti, 2007; Virno, 1996) are employed to provide a frame for action across different ethical bases, and beyond the production of commodities. This frame is applied to two examples: Molleindustria's app *Phone Story* (2012) and the Diaspora social media project (2010 – present). In their own ways, these projects critique existing modes of production and offer pathways to alternative practices.

### Introduction

As we witness a rise in 'ethical branding', we should interrogate which practices could have any effect on ethical concerns. Capitalism generates the need for ethical consumption and benefits from its sale. Ethical practices must move

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beyond the sphere of consumption; likewise, analyses of ethical branding should address communication and networking. What we need is a concrete understanding of how brands communicate information about themselves. This can reveal that alternative ethical practices are not only possible, but are already occurring.

For this paper, 'the ethics of the brand' is an attempt to understand the ways that particular branded commodities offer footholds for ethical practice. We are interested in the kinds of concerns they make available or foreclose, rather than investigating of the morality of brands. Our choice follows Deleuze's distinction between ethics – as a 'typology of immanent modes of existence' – and morality, which 'refers existence to transcendent values' (1988: 23). Drawing on two case studies, we analyse the claims to ethics that brands make, so as to contribute to an understanding of 'ethical consumption' as a whole. This approach shifts the stake of the ethics of the brand from a form of proscription that charts its successes in terms of competition between businesses, to an interest in the development of productive networks outside of capital.

In our discussions of ethical claims, we wish to focus on the forms of behaviour that individuals take on in response to claims that brands make about themselves. The claim is a statement made by a brand about its mode of production. Our goal is to address how these claims provoke consumers to surpass a form of life reliant on capitalist exchange; here, our conception of the ethical claim bridges the gap between material things and immaterial representations. In the present work we focus on the ethical claim as it relates to the production of goods beyond capitalism.

The power of consumers to change capitalism is at stake in discussions of ethical branding (Arvidsson, 2013). Marketing texts advocate for a new level of consumer sovereignty (Devinney, Auger, and Eckhardt, 2010), cultural studies scholars address practices of 'ethical consumption' (Lewis and Potter, 2011), and autonomist thinkers conceive of a 'multitude' threatening to dissolve capitalism (Hardt and Negri, 2000). Hirschman (1970) describes relations with capitalist institutions in terms of 'exit' – quitting a job or changing one's purchasing habits – and 'voice' – communicating one's critique by complaining or protesting. Yet such critiques are intelligible within capitalism as the expression of a market preference (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 42). The autonomist concepts of 'refusal' (Tronti), and 'exodus' (Virno) provide a means of understanding social action that goes beyond capitalism. Further, the Italian autonomist Marxists provide a perspective onto ethical practice that allows for individual ethics to change and mutate over time. The methods of resistance developed by the autonomists are specifically geared towards a political, ethical life that is not

beholden to any particular ethic, and, most importantly, do not form a political or organisational totality. This means that ethical practices can remain individual and outside capitalism, without gaining the uniform position of a deontological approach, or lapsing into a market liberalism that is only capable of finding a solution through the directed exchange of currency.

The conventional means of assessing ethical branding tends to lead to moral orthodoxy. By assessing unusual objects within the discourse of ethical brands, we expose hidden practices. We have chosen the Diaspora social networking platform and the activist videogame *Phone Story* as case studies for our project. Diaspora and *Phone Story* illustrate particular resistant behaviours that are far from unique. Our choice of these examples directs the discussion beyond changing patterns of commodity consumption: to software (*Phone Story*) and social networking (Diaspora). *Phone Story* is a videogame that takes on the Apple iPhone, and calls for a refusal of Apple's device ecology. The choice offered by *Phone Story*'s critique is binary – buy, or do not. The situation becomes more complex in our next case. The Diaspora software package is both an ethical criticism of Facebook, and a solution in itself. Building on each of these case studies, we can expose patterns of behaviour that have a political component.

## Phone Story

The art-game *Phone Story*, produced by Molleindustria, provides an example of the connection between ethical claims and refusal. This game, produced in 2011, reflects and contributes to what we might call the 'becoming-problematic' of Apple Computers: the troubling of the smooth corporate image maintained by the Californian computer company and the upsetting of their accounts of the production history of their devices. The sleek and glossy finish of an Apple product does nothing to suggest its origins. *Phone Story* is shown to call for a refusal of consumption on the basis of both the exploitation of workers involved in the production of iPhones and the 'phantasmatic individualism' of consumer demand (Clemens, 2013).

The labor practices that surround the production of an Apple iPod, iPhone, or iPad remain largely undiscussed in the marketing of these commodities, although they have garnered increasing critical attention in the mass media (see, for example, Duhigg and Barboza, 2012). Academic attention has also focused on the political economy of the coltan that is necessary in iOS device production and the war economy maintained by the economic drive for the next generation phone (Dyer-Witheford, 2010: 492; Nest, 2011). Also excluded from the brand are the labor practices of the factories at Foxconn – the contract manufacturer for

many electronic components – where laborers have threatened, and at times attempted, the ultimate form of biopolitical refusal: suicide en masse. In 2012, some 150 workers massed on the roof of Foxconn’s factory in Chengdu, threatening suicide to protest working conditions (Moore, 2012). Until recently a relatively invisible link in Apple’s supply chain, Foxconn must now make ethical claims of its own, such as a ‘devotion to greater social harmony and higher ethical standards’ (Foxconn, 2012).

These conditions of production for Apple’s portable devices are obviously not something that Apple engages in. Its corporate site does contain Supplier Responsibility Progress Reports that cover the auditing of the production process for Apple’s devices, as written by the non-profit Fair Labor Association (Apple Inc., 2012). Yet given that the Fair Labor Association lists Apple as a core affiliate (Fair Labor Association, 2012), there is a risk of a circular logic collapsing upon itself here: Apple leans on the Fair Labor Association to support its ethical claims, but what does the Fair Labor Association have to support its claims to be a reliable auditor but its relationship with Apple? Political economic analysis of these claims reveals these feedback loops.

*Phone Story* critiques this situation (Molleindustria, 2012). *Phone Story* is a videogame that offers users a brief window into the production history of Apple devices, and of the future that awaits the device once we dispose of it. Though its lifespan on the App Store was only a few hours, it remains available on the Android Market and as a Flash game on the Molleindustria website. In the game, players are called on to perform tasks that mimic each stage of the iPhone production process. The narrative positions this production as quickly meeting the demands of consumers, and shares a genre of gestural gameplay with games such as *Cooking Mama* (Office Create, 2006). *Phone Story* opens up four moments of production: the mining of rare earth elements in central Africa, preventing workers from suicide in China, throwing iPhones to hordes of consumers in an anonymous urban setting, and lastly salvaging recyclable e-waste parts in India. Throughout the game a voice-over narration connects the onscreen action to the production of the device on which it is being played. These issues are raised as direct criticisms of the device’s legacy: *Phone Story* claims that the iPhone has an innately destructive existence. These claims call upon the player to question the ethics of their iPhone.

This critique of the iPhone platform is complicated by coming from within the device; playing the game on the Molleindustria website seems empty in comparison. *Phone Story*’s logic seeks a case where the game is unable to be played, yet once the game is playable on a smartphone it is already too late to be innocent of the situation that the game criticises. Ethical practices that respond to

this are not simply redirecting consumption habits, but calling for an avoidance of consumption altogether. We can see this goal evident in *Phone Story*, and also in the game's online branding materials:

When you purchased this phone, it was new and sexy. You've been waiting for it for months. No evidence of its troubling past was visible. Did you really need it? Of course you did. A lot of money was invested to instill this desire in you. You were looking for something that could signal your status, your dynamic lifestyle, your unique personality. Just like everyone else. (Molleindustria)

Once the player has completed the final task – sorting the e-waste components for recycling – the game unlocks 'obsolescence mode': an ever-accelerating, looping version of the game. There is no end in sight for the cycle of production and consumption, a thought which the designers hope will stick with the player after the words 'game over' appear on the screen.



Figure 1: Phone Story, Molleindustria, (CC BY-NC-SA 3.0)

*Phone Story*'s importance comes not from its representation of the supply chain of mobile devices, but its self-critique as part of a software-hardware assemblage. The presence of the ethical claim on the platform does something that a story about the device, outside of the phone, cannot do. Playing the game is a performance that attempts to render visible what is already inside the phone.

Although the game operates on many platforms, it is most cutting in its critique when played on an iPhone: the voice-over addresses the user from the point of view of the phone itself, relating its story. *Phone Story* was swiftly pulled from the App Store by Apple's 'quality control' department. iPhone could no longer speak of their own history, muting their ethical criticisms, irrespective of *Phone Story's* availability elsewhere.

*Phone Story's* target is Apple devices, but the production cycle of Samsung or HTC Android phones is not greatly different. Indeed, components for many of these devices are produced in the same conditions. The game is then in the awkward position of offering a cathartic critique of Apple without similarly exposing the origins of other consumer electronics. These electronics are almost uniformly constructed using Congolese coltan, Chinese labor, Californian aesthetics, and await a future disassembly in countries that ignore the great physical and environmental cost of e-cycling. This highlights the fact that *Phone Story* limits its criticism to iPhone, and only the iPhone.

Our analysis indicates that a switch from iPhone to Samsung Galaxy is not sufficient. An examination of the supply chain of each device would have difficulty turning up some essence present in one that is not in the other. Given that *Phone Story* seeks the demise of the iPhone, the ethical telos of *Phone Story* is its own irrelevance. Molleindustria's scope of effects is rather limited in as much as it does not make a profit from the game. Rather than capitalising on sales to fund further commentary, their 'non-business model' invests much of their earnings in charitable donations to grassroots organizations. Clearly something more than a switch from Apple to Samsung is required. This 'something more' will be discussed in terms of the concepts of refusal and exodus, which emerge from streams of Marxist thought in Italy. Before that, however, it is necessary to complicate the notion of the 'brand'.

## Brands and claims

Acknowledging the centrality to brands in everyday life (Lash, 2002: 250), we focus on the prevalence and function of ethical claims in the marketplace, which we see as opening up the mode of production to criticism and resistance. This section begins with a discussion of the properties of brands as 'complex objects', drawing on the work of Lury and Arvidsson. It then discusses the turn towards 'ethical' brands, and branding as a means of practicing 'ethical consumption'. In order to critically examine the values that underpin ethical branding, we turn to Boltanski and Thévenot's 'economies of worth'. The ethical claim – the claim to

some ethical position – is presented as the unit of analysis most fitted to the task at hand.

### *Brands*

As *Phone Story* illustrates, a brand is a complex thing. Brands are heterogeneous assemblages of information and material, which attempt to capture consumers' esteem (Lury, 2004: 5; Arvidsson, 2006: 10; Cochoy, 2007: 205). Brands are a means of collecting, aggregating or assembling the 'ethical surplus' produced in the immaterial labor of consumption (Lazzaratto, cited in Arvidsson, 2006: 10). The claims to quality that brands make are not necessarily verifiable, yet the resulting ethical practices of consumption can have real effects. Research has already addressed the effects of ethical consumption on workers and environments in specific contexts of production, such as Mexico (Renard and Pérez-Grovas, 2007), South Africa (Kruger and du Toit, 2007), Nicaragua (Utting, 2009), and India (Scherer-Haynes, 2007: 228).

As 'dynamic platforms for practice', brands share a family resemblance to devices such as 'standards' and 'certifications' (Lury, 2004: 4). The certification offered by fair trade organisations depends upon trust in the certifier, while many standards may be international in reach but offer a bare minimum of ethical behaviour. Primarily interested in competition between goods in the market, standards have difficulty addressing non-market forms of worth (Thévenot, 2009: 802). The term 'regulation' or 'standard' implies that there is a degree of national jurisdiction involved, as different legal systems limit what can or cannot be mentioned. The insufficiency of these is exemplified by the United States Department of Agriculture, which requires only that animals have 'been allowed access to the outside' – with no mention of duration, frequency or quality – in order to be described as 'free range' (USDA, 2012). Certification is supported only by reference to a certification organization and the rigor of a particular standard. Fair Trade Certification is one such standard that operates in a consistent fashion worldwide (Fairtrade Foundation, 2011; Reinecke, 2010). Other standards vary from country to country. In the context from which we write, Australia, there is no governmental standard for organic products; successive governments have left a solution up to the market (Organic Foundation of Australia, 2009). The most prominent certification scheme is that provided by the National Association for Sustainable Agriculture Australia, which requires that 95% of produce be organic for certification (NASAA, 2012: 23). It is important, then, to consider branding and certification in terms of the networks that support the claims that are made.

### *Ethical brands and ethical consumption*



There exists an easy slippage from thinking of ‘the ethics of the brand’ to so-called ‘ethical brands’; that is, from an analysis of the claims that brands make to a discussion of certain brands already understood as morally good. We feel that to approach ‘ethical consumption’ as an object (Devinney, Auger and Eckhardt, 2010; Newholm, 2005; Lang and Gabriel, 2005) is already to grant too much ground to the production and marketing of these commodities as ethical.

‘Ethical consumption’ encompasses many different critiques of capitalist production, from animal welfare, to social justice, to environmental sustainability. Such a concept is problematic when it assumes that certain commodities are ethical without examining the claims that they make. Because ethical consumption accepts the purchase of commodities as a political behaviour, it is totally recuperable within the cycles of capitalism (Coles, 2011). Because ‘ethical commodities’ tend to cost more than conventional alternatives – due to more expensive production methods, higher wages, or regulatory oversight – they reinforce class tensions by promoting a mode of consumption not available to all (Guthman, 2007). Furthermore, the privileging of particular commodity genres, such as coffee, as arenas for ethical practice ignores the extent to which all commodities are products of labor and thus raise ethical concerns. ‘Normal’ consumption, such as receiving ‘value for money’ when shopping for one’s family, is still a form of ethical practice (Littler, 2011). Here the ethics are based on the exploitation of the self through an evaluation of one’s wages against a commodity’s price. By operating through the purchasing of commodities, ethical consumption can only reorganize the capitalist economy. Yet the move to large-scale ethical consumption despite additional costs points to a social desire for a change in contemporary modes of production. This is a desire that persists irrespective of whether we can trust the claims of ethical brands or not.

The primary issue is, however, that ‘ethical commodities’ share an aesthetic but not necessarily an ethic. This aesthetic leads paradoxically to a less-ethical engagement with consumption – where the effort of an ethical life is offloaded onto a set of expert systems, such as *Ethical Consumer Magazine* in the UK and the ‘Shop Ethical!’ apps for iOS devices, with no consideration of alternatives such as reduced consumption, or finding solutions outside of the marketplace. These expert systems vary in their conceptions of ethical behaviour (Littler, 2011). When these institutions bring together a broad range of practices into a single term they risk neutralizing the intensity of ethics. Ethical consumption, in this sense, leads to an ideological closure of investigation rather than an opening up of critique and debate (see Reinecke, 2010: 578). This is the source of the slippage, and paves the way to the current problematic case of ‘greenwashing’, where packaging mimics a ‘green’ aesthetic. What is needed in these cases is to



find ‘the ethics of the brand’. Refocusing on the ethics of the brand, rather than ethical consumption, means that analysis can address production. Once this happens, we no longer need to become fixated on the marketplace as the site where responses to branding occur, and a wealth of systematic and productive responses begin to reveal themselves. More importantly, ethical branding can lead to real changes in the mode of production, and we can see this through the device of the ‘claim’.

### *Claims*

Social science research – and everyday practice – needs to be able to grasp an object for analysis from within the brand. The otherwise nebulous nature of the brand assemblage resists analysis. We propose the ‘ethical claim’ as a solution to this problem. The claim is a specific and tangible node within this assemblage that enables research to address the brand in its own terms.

The ethical claim is the element of the brand assemblage that exposes the brand to ethical criticism. A claim expresses something about the history of the commodity that it is attached to: being ‘sweatshop free’, ‘halal’, and so on. We might distinguish our idea of the claim from other parts of the brand assemblage, such as promises of future health, happiness or success, or accusations that commodities make about each other. While these latter statements tend to address the future – particularly the consumer’s future – the claim makes concrete statements about the history of its own assemblage. The claim allows us to analyse a brand’s statements about its own political economic concerns, and thus opens up the production process to critique and resistance. This is why playing Molleindustria’s *Phone Story* on another platform has a different form of critique compared to playing it on an iPhone. The claim also acts as a site for critical inquiry: if certain goods are to be understood as ethical, how are ethics communicated, where are they instantiated, and what are they directed at? If ‘ethical consumption’ is a discursive formation, then ethical claims are the ‘statements’ of which that formation is composed (see Foucault, 1972: 107). In the frame of the ethics of the brand, we consider the ethical claim to be the assets of a commodity’s branding that attempt to put stake in the commodity’s origins, primarily at the point of production, but also at the point of resource extraction. While it is practically impossible to become certain about the nature of commodities, and hence of the validity of the claims that brands make, these claims nevertheless provide an object that brands and researchers have in common. By having an idea of what a brand claims, we can determine that, in fact, most brands claim very little about their history. The policing of ‘health claims’ is common enough in national contexts (Pollan, 2008: 155), but ethical claims are much more difficult to test. Therefore we call for attention to the

networks that support particular claims. Such an approach has already assisted our analysis of the relationship between Apple and the Fair Labor Association. We can consider further examples: Fox News brands its journalism as 'Fair and Balanced' (Fox News, 2013), and Google's Code of Conduct has 'Don't be evil' as its core tenet (Google, 2012). Because they make no reference to an external standard, these claims are very difficult to test. We need to focus, therefore, on the claims to ethics that brands make, and the way they mobilize justifications (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006).

In general, ethical claims argue that existing market relationships do not adequately account for the market relation – whether in terms of externalities such as pollution or internalities like wages – and aim to improve the efficiency of the market by incorporating these externalities into the market relationship (Callon, 1998). Ethical brands position themselves as more accurately accounting for these externalities. The vagaries of consumer demand expose workers in the developing world to great fluctuations in price, not to mention toxic chemicals. In response, the Fair Trade certification scheme reframes the exchange to protect farmers from health and financial risks (Reinecke, 2010). We should be wary of 'stakeholder colonization' (Banerjee, 2008: 72), however, which understands only one mode of existence – that of the 'stakeholder' – and sees money as the only solution to problems of production.

The 'ethics' in ethical claims are vast, variable, and highly subjective; a consumer can choose to withdraw from a particular brand for many different ethical reasons: labor rights, animal treatment, religious practice, or otherwise. Similarly, ethical claims may target production, the mode or location of resource extraction, or the cost of distribution. For instance, Fair Trade is one of many attempts to brand production as equitable or sustainable for workers. The label 'organic', in turn, suggests the protection of the environment from fertilizers, hormonal treatments, or anti-fungal agents. Organic production often appears in conjunction with claims in other ethical directions: soil health, food miles or animal welfare yet, as Julie Guthman's (2004) research on the Californian organic industry shows, large-scale organic production recreates much of the same exploitation of labor as conventional agriculture. The production of any commodity mobilizes a vast network; the claim is what opens this network up to ethical critique.

The grapes that sit upon the supermarket shelf are mute; we cannot see the fingerprints of exploitation upon them or tell immediately what part of the world they are from. We can, by further enquiry, lift the veil on this geographical and social ignorance and make ourselves aware of these issues (as we do when we engage in a consumer boycott of nonunion or South African grapes). But in so

doing we have to go beyond what the market itself reveals in order to understand how society is working. (Harvey, 1990: 423)

This quote from Harvey exemplifies the contemporary shift towards an ‘ethics of the brand’. Today, the market speaks voluminously about the provenance of a large degree of its produce. Less packaged commodities, such as fresh vegetables, might with more difficulty have ethical claims attached to them, but increasingly claims to ethics have become part of the commodity itself. Because of this process we are currently experiencing an abundance of ‘organic’, ‘fair trade’, and ‘green’ commodity brandings or, described more sceptically, ‘designer hair-shirts’ (Sloterdijk, 2011: 47). Regardless of their veracity, ethical claims engage in a form of subjectivation and have effects upon the form-of-life of capitalist subjects, calling for them to be ethical (Foucault, 1991: 352). Yet we do not believe that consumption – ‘more capitalism’ – is sufficient to produce shifts in post-Fordism: systemic change must be found elsewhere.

## Refusal and exodus

The post-autonomist political tactics of refusal and exodus allow us to understand non-market responses to ethical claims. This section of the paper articulates these autonomist modes of resistance in new ways. Refusal, from Mario Tronti, can be repositioned as a means of resistance to the social relations of capital. Refusal has historically been the refusal of work. We extend this concept from the sphere of production to the sphere of consumption – where acts of purchasing, or joining a network, are a form of labor (cf. du Gay, 1996; Terranova, 2004; Fuchs, 2010). Exodus describes the emergence of new modes of production when refusal finds its limits (Virno, 1996). Ethical claims, as we have described them above, call for forms of resistance to capitalism. By approaching ethical claims through the lens of refusal and exodus, we show how these practices of resistance can escape rearticulation within capital.

The concept of refusal emerged from the discourses within Italian Marxism during the 1960s, and was formalised in Mario Tronti’s 1965 publication, ‘The Strategy of Refusal’ (2007). Tronti presents a new methodological perspective which highlights the capacity for change as located within the working class, without need for violent revolution. Resistance comes first in identifying that the laborer has the power to conduct this change without smashing the state. Capitalism, for Tronti, is simply one of many methods for the ‘civilization of labour’, in the sense of pacifying rather than ennobling the worker (Tronti, 2007: 30). In Tronti’s view, genuine resistance – a ‘refusal’ – has a very specific space for expression, and must come before the engagement with capitalism occurs. For the exploitation of labor, this must occur before the worker has assented to

their domination through a contract or a wage, as this engagement is the precise act of 'giving up' on the matter. This is obvious enough, as most labor strikes do not seek less capitalist oppression, but rather 'fairer "participation" in the profit of capital' (Tronti, 2007: 30).

While refusal has been associated with labor and production, this paper applies refusal to consumption. Acts of consumption are understood as a form of labor because they produce value from the affective ties between individuals (Arvidsson, 2005: 240). Paul du Gay likewise notes that distinctions between production and consumption are blurred in contemporary management discourse (1996: 76). Affective labor is a form of labor that monetizes social connections, identified by Hardt and Negri (2000) as constructing biopolitical networks between society and capitalism. This colonization of social life by forms of unpaid labor seems both immeasurable and intractable, but also presents opportunities for resistance at every turn.

Refusal can be applied to consumption in three senses, only one of which we consider to be 'true' refusal, as capitalism accommodates for the others. The first is the abandonment of one commodity in favour of another: to drive a hybrid car rather than a petrol fuelled vehicle, for example. Often such commodities are produced as a premium component of a product line, and thus pose little threat to a particular corporate enterprise. This is how refusal understands 'ethical consumption': as an abortive attempt to mitigate the effects of capitalism. The second sense is the aversion to a commodity genre, such as the choice to eat no meat, to never own a car, to never adopt Facebook. This practice of refusal, too, has limits: it drives the consumer out of a relationship of communication with the processes of production – in Hirschman's terms, it robs them of their 'voice'. Furthermore, this practice is rarely driven in response to explicit criticisms, but rather in response to long-term or non-economic considerations. Applying refusal from wage labor onto consumption labor in the context of ethical commodities means that refusal cannot simply mean buying a different commodity. Just as autonomist politics calls for a 'liberation from work' (Weeks, 2005: 120), 'true' refusal must include the refusal of consumption.

Refusal is, however, not sufficient alone to address the role that ethical claims play in the cycles of capitalism. In calling for 'exodus', Hardt and Negri suggest that refusal itself is

the beginning of a liberatory politics, but it is only a beginning. The refusal in itself is empty. ... What we need is to create a new social body, which is a project that goes well beyond refusal. (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 204)

Exodus is not a singular step away from a capitalist system, but is rather a perpetually critical mode of existence that is engaged in producing new economic conditions. As a method of resistance, it can never be completely recuperated within market capitalism – as might ‘exit’ for Hirschman (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 42). Instead, the concept of exodus fights to go beyond capitalism. Exodus can, however, be used to describe the types of action taken on by those invested in ethical consumption. Those engaged in the practice of exodus do not seek to simply deny this world, but rather seek to actively construct the next one. Paolo Virno provides a definition:

I use the term Exodus here to define mass defection from the State, the alliance between general intellect and political Action, and a movement toward the public sphere of Intellect. The term is not at all conceived as some defensive existential strategy—it is neither exiting on tiptoe through the back door nor a search for sheltering hideaways. Quite the contrary: what I mean by Exodus is a full-fledged model of action, capable of confronting the challenges of modern politics ... a realm of common affairs has to be defined from scratch. (Virno, 1996: 197)

Exodus is an attempt to produce a destination beyond capitalism that is already prepared for our arrival (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 301-3).

In the context of ethical consumption, exodus signifies the simultaneous refusal of a mode of production and the development of alternatives. If we restrict ourselves to the geographic metaphor, in exodus people construct a new space to be occupied as they quit a previous space. Compare this with the practitioners of refusal, which only ever leave and abandon – or, perhaps, they are ‘fleeing, yes, but while fleeing looking for a weapon’ (Deleuze, quoted in Raunig, 2010: 57). In this case, for those concerned with the ethics of production the weapon has been found, and it is a new mode of production beyond capitalism. When these weapons are communicated and networked, then the solution is no longer individual, but becomes common, and opens on to a possibility for exodus. The social networking site Diaspora, to which we now turn, presents an exemplary – if not untroubled – case of exodus from one means of social media production to another.

## Diaspora

The social media project of Diaspora brands itself as a destination for those who wish to leave Facebook, in response to the site’s treatment of privacy, data ownership and free labor. On a more abstract level, it resists the colonization of communication by post-Fordist capital (Lazzarato, 1996: 140). Yet the ethics of Diaspora are more than discursive: the site’s open-source code short-circuits

some ethical concerns entirely. It therefore represents an example of exodus, albeit one that is problematized by the low number of users who have migrated.

The project for a distributed and open-source social network, Diaspora (2012), emerges precisely out of the question of exodus. Four graduate students at New York University, dissatisfied with their own investments of personal information and free labor on the Facebook platform, began programming 'Diaspora' a 'privacy-aware, personally controlled, do-it-all, open source social network' (Diaspora, 2012). The launch of a Kickstarter crowd-funding campaign aligned with a renewed wave of anti-Facebook sentiment and the Quit Facebook Day campaign (Singel, 2010).

The project addresses three critiques of social networking sites: the creation of value through 'user-generated content', the protection of privacy and the control of one's data. Using Facebook and Google is conceived as free labor because the content – both for users and for advertising – is produced by the users themselves (Pasquinelli, 2009). Yet, as the debate between Fuchs (2010) and Arvidsson and Colleoni (2012) identifies, the degree to which users of Facebook can be said to be exploited is still an open debate. A second concern for users is Facebook's potential abuse of user data, such as targeted advertising based on demographics (Fuchs, 2012). Third is the question of control over one's data, hosted in the United States, subject to American law: the extent of data capture is notoriously difficult to determine. Lastly, Diaspora addresses a more abstract idea of Facebook as a disciplinary technology: 'the convenience of putting all of our information in the hands of companies is training us to casually sacrifice our privacy and fragment our online identities' (Diaspora, 2010). As these concerns become progressively more ephemeral, it becomes more difficult to resist Facebook on its own terms.

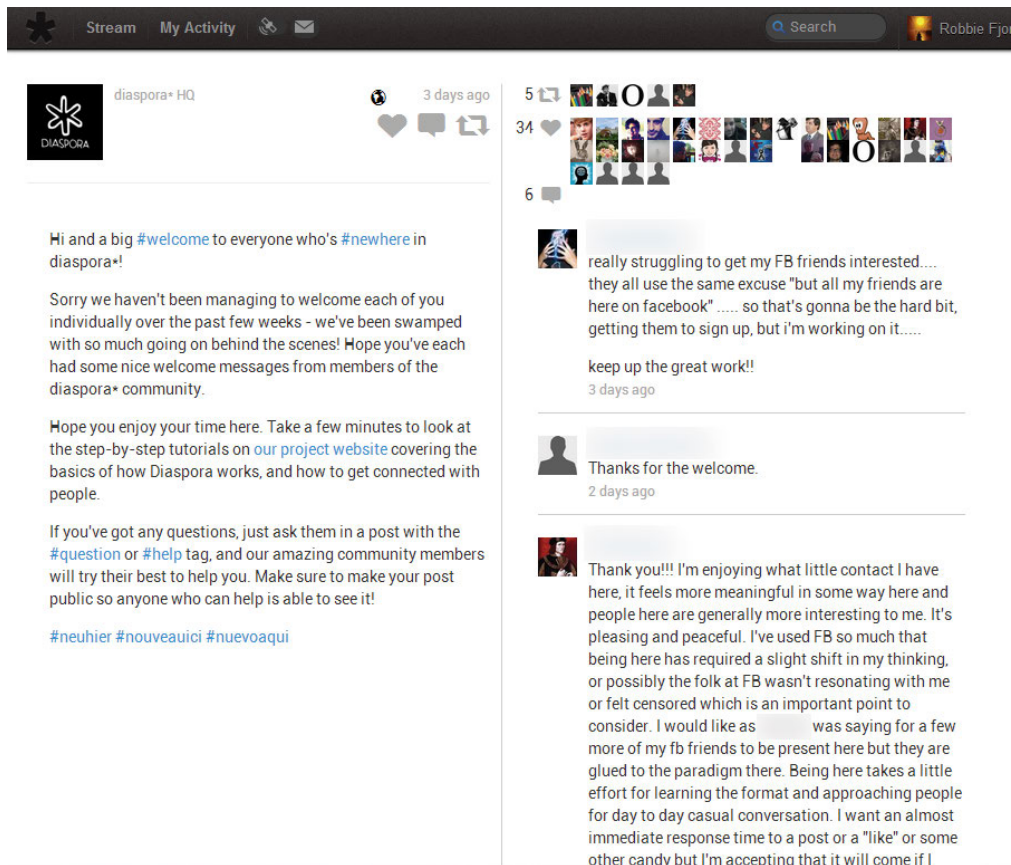


Figure 2: Diaspora, Diaspora.org, (CC BY 3.0)

Where *Phone Story* aims at its own irrelevance, Diaspora's telos is an exodus from Facebook. Diaspora attempts this transition through its visual appearance, the affordances of its architecture, and the legal status of the project's code. At the level of interface, Diaspora's form of communication is similar to Facebook's: users have 'walls', 'feeds', and 'tags'. However, users need not provide a 'real' name, are free to export their data at any time, and they determine others' level of access to their personal information. At the level of architecture, Diaspora users choose where to host their data: either on their own server or one of a number of 'pods' established for the purpose. These pods vary in location – and hence connection latency and legal jurisdiction – as well as reliability and patronage (Diaspora, 2013). Lastly, Diaspora exists as a number of implementations, or 'forks'. The 'right to fork' – the right to take a project's code and freely implement it elsewhere – is enshrined in free and open source software movements, and has been exercised by a number of developers to offer their own versions of Diaspora. It is therefore difficult to speak of Diaspora in a singular sense, since implementations vary in their features, popularity, and



interoperability with each other. One popular implementation is even interoperable with Facebook through an API, minimizing both the 'cost' of leaving Facebook and the 'leaving' (Diaspora, 2012).

Diaspora represents an exodus from Facebook, but not an untroubled one. Diaspora does not propose an exit from 'social networking' altogether, in favour of more 'immediate' personal networks, but rather focuses upon two points: the freedom of movement and creation of value. Diaspora addresses the well-documented difficulty in removing one's data from Facebook, which for some users will represent years of elaborate cultivation. The ethics of Diaspora are based on its claim to allow users 'freedom', implying a contrast to the Facebook platform. Where Facebook stores all data on its own servers and adopts control of the intellectual property of the information that it stores, the Diaspora protocol allows each user's computer to become a server and to retain rights to the information they host. In addition to one's own data being portable, the entire project's code is freely licensed as part of the Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) movement. This license maintains Diaspora outside of copyrighting and prevents the capitalisation of users' 'free labor'. Through the 'right to fork' the Diaspora project allows those who wish to stage their own alternatives to easily attempt to do so, although as the size of the project increases so does the difficulty of such an undertaking (see Tkacz, 2011). One aspect of exodus that is problematic for considering Diaspora is the question of destination: exodus is 'exodus to' as well as 'exodus from'. Diaspora exists in several implementations, some of which require more expertise than others. Remaining barriers to entry are both technical – Diaspora requires a greater degree of computer literacy compared to Facebook – and social – as Metcalfe's law suggests, the 'value' of the network is linked to the number of people that it connects. Although the project has not strictly failed, it has not been adopted to any great degree. It is no longer an imaginary destination for exodus but has yet to make exodus imaginable for a wide range of people.

## Conclusion

Our discussion moves past seeing ethical branding as an aesthetic, and points to responses that propose alternative ethical habits. Post-Fordism is predicated upon an ever-greater scrutiny over workers, goods, and consumers, yet increasing communication also factors into practices of resistance. It is precisely due to the proliferation of communication that ethical critiques can cut diagonally across borders of class and nation. When these practices can be recirculated in informational forms, such as in *Phone Story* and Diaspora, then

these forms-of-life become vibrant and political, something more than a barometer of dissent.

We have provided a means of interrogating the ethical brand through the lens of the ethical claim. This produces a methodological approach that can unpack the ‘economies of worth’ underpinning ethical branding. We can thus point to substantial tensions within modes of production and consumer behaviour. The call for refusal posed by *Phone Story*, and the new possibilities of social media proposed by *Diaspora*, point to two applications of autonomist thought in ways that present real opportunities for political action. We see the ‘right to fork’ – written into *Diaspora*’s architecture – as one of many practical applications of refusal which cannot be reincorporated by Facebook. *Diaspora* is capable of things that would compromise Facebook’s unity as a business. The application of critiques of Facebook at the level of *Diaspora*’s code builds a destination for exodus that can avoid colonization. The consumption of commodities will never lead to a new mode of production. In the absence of a total revolution, the politicization of consumption does suggest a partial exodus, and a partial refusal.

The ethics of the brand, understood through specific ethical claims, stages a criticism across capitalism, calling for an examination of consumption and encouraging a move to independent production. Claims provide a foothold for critical analysis and resistance; both are most productive when they conceive of economies beyond capital.

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## the authors

Robbie Fordyce is a PhD candidate in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. His thesis examines post-autonomist Marxist theories of subjectivity and global capitalism in the framework of networked communication.  
Email: robbiefordyce@gmail.com

Luke van Ryn is a PhD candidate in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. He is interested in the environmental politics of food and media production, actor-network theory and the sociology of critique. His thesis studies the networks of justification at work in Australian television production.

Email: [lukevanryn@gmail.com](mailto:lukevanryn@gmail.com)