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# TRACING TRUST AND DISTRUST

## LEVITICUS REINTERPRETED IN THE FRAME OF THE CONTEMPORARY CONSUMER CULTURE

**Jitka Cirklová\***

*Vysoká škola finanční a správní, Prague 10, Estonská 500, 101 00, Czech Republic*

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### **Abstract**

The paradox of increasing connectivity and diversification of local and global markets enable us to monitor the impact of socio-demographic identities and their associated value models not only on new forms of lifestyles but also on consumer behaviour and consumer culture in general. Products whose final form and composition are influenced by specifically stringent value and religious priorities have been designed for a narrow group of confessional consumers since the beginning of the production process. In this paper we would like to point out to an emerging practice where the religious values reflected in products are targeted by a broad group of consumers who use it as a tool to facilitate their decision-making and to ease their orientation in the reality of overwhelming offer of the contemporary market. We also would like to outline some mechanism functioning for the producers outside of the religious strata who nevertheless fulfil the requirements of religious dietary laws in order to create relationship with heterogeneous communities of customers in dissimilar social settings. The text presented here is shedding some light on the contemporary forms of interaction between the system of the dietary rules of the Jewish Orthodox community based on the biblical traditions and the trends of recent consumer culture who is reinterpreting the biblical heritage in the frame of daily consumption.

*Keywords:* value, models, cultural creativity, kosher diet, minimalism

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### **1. Introduction**

The manifestation of the socio-cultural context of consumer culture, and in particular the dynamics of alternative hedonism as well as the global trend of consumer cultural creativity, is only marginalized in the Czech academic environment. Contributions by Czech and Slovak scholars are rather sporadic, recent works represented by Roubal [1], Librová [2], Zahrádka [3], Čichovský [4] can be understood as the most influential in the discussed framework. Of many foreign works, we would like to mention the text based on the extensive empirical research on consumer behaviour, lifestyles and value orientation by Ray and Anderson [5]. The result of their work is the introduction of the concept of

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\*E-mail: [jitka.cirklova@vsfs.cz](mailto:jitka.cirklova@vsfs.cz)

Cultural Creativism which was applied in the research of the Czech society by Kašparová [6].

Cultural Creatives [5] are an increasingly expanding subculture that highlights values such as ecology, sustainable economic development, fairness in market and work relationships. According to the authors the described value-based subculture is reaching an increasing number of 30% of economically active population of developed societies. For the described group, authenticity and consistent action are essential; consistency with the declared inner conviction of the individual, words, and outer activity. At the same time, the Cultural Creatives do not designate themselves as a part of traditional religious organizations but also not as the technocratic modernists or atheists. Based on their findings, authors introduce them as an integral subculture that is characterized by a specific lifestyle with an emphasis on personal set of mentioned values.

Kašparová [6] in her primary research focused on how her respondents justify their decisions and negotiate their difference in the frame of education system. Acting from the position of their internalized value sets they are one of the active elements of transformation of the local system of primary education. Nevertheless they believe their actions are of an isolated and individual character, not perceiving the social impact of the group acting from the same value background. The similar parallel can be drawn among the consumers who without being rooted in Jewish tradition intentionally search for kosher certified products, because of its non-material values that are being ascribed to this production.

Market environment is a place where customers are encountering products that are primarily destined for a limited group of consumers whose value priorities are shaped and enforced by a religious belief and tradition. A religious institution is strictly monitoring compliance of contemporary production with the tradition of prescribed rules in the food processing industry. And it is precisely the strict consistency of kosher surveillance adding to the status of the offered goods that is becoming attractive for customers with a completely different lifestyle than associated with the Jewish Orthodox communities. The ritually clean food and other similar commodities are commonly intended for customers from a specific ethnic or religious segment. In recent years the professional marketing media refer to the research published by Kosher Network International [<https://koshernetwork.com>], which is a global platform on the presented problematic, noticing and predicting an increased interest in products which are labelled by a certificate guaranteeing both, content and production process, in accordance with Jewish traditions and doctrines. Among the requested labels of the food products, the kosher certificate was the most coveted label on food items [D. Shanker, Quartz, 8(June) (2015), <https://qz.com/407157/>]. It even exceeded the allergen labels in food such as 'gluten-free'. Demand for these products shows that besides consumers docked in orthodox Jewish religion, there is going to be another group of consumers opting for ritually pure foods who do not hesitate to pay a significantly higher amount for a product with kosher certificate, similarly as a socially or ecologically conscious consumer prefers to buy more expensive goods,

which by being marked by a specific label (Fair Trade, palm oil free, etc.) as environmentally or socially friendly product.

## **2. Kosher certification process as commodification of expert knowledge – global trademark competing with local communities**

The Czech kosher market, the volume of certified products, as well as the membership in the Jewish communities is significantly smaller, nevertheless the trend of increased interest in the kosher certification can be observed. Presented findings are the result of an intensive field research and semi-structured interview collected over the time of four months with the representatives of active agents: producers, consumers, representatives of Jewish communities, Federation of the Food and Drink Industries of the Czech Republic (FFDI) [Potravinařská komora České republiky, Federation of the Food and Drink Industries of the Czech Republic (FFDI), <http://www.foodnet.cz>] and after closer examination of the structure and its inner dynamic it is possible to name several elements and mechanism interplaying and reinterpreting the original religious doctrine in the field of consumer culture.

In the Czech Republic there are in ten Jewish communities registered 3000 members and about 2000 members in other Jewish organizations. The approximated number of non-registered people who would qualify as Jewish according to the tradition the Jewish community estimates as at least double [World Jewish Congress (n.d.), Community in Czechia, <http://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/about/communities/CZ>]. This quantification doesn't explain the growing interest of the last four years in the kosher certification. The practice of consumption in which the consumer is searching for the kosher label based on his or her own personal religious obligation is only one phenomenon. The other personal reasons are influenced by a different set of values and believes. At the same time, at the company level, the trend of obtaining kosher certificate can be understood as a form of tool and strategy of local producers to enter the global market.

The Hebrew expression of *kosher* is commonly translated as suitable, eligible, ritually acceptable. What is permissible to eat and what is not is clearly listed in the book of Leviticus (11.3 and 11.7-8) and Deuteronomy (14) [Kosher certification and compliance | OK Kosher, <http://www.ok.org>]. The individual Jewish communities around the world have created culinary variations that evolved around the basic ritual rules. The prohibition of combining meat and dairy products is the best known. Only the consumption of ruminant meat with split hooves, ordinary domestic poultry is allowed. Only fish with fins and gills are permitted. Fruits and vegetables must not contain insects. Dairy products must not contain anything other than dairy ingredients (e.g. animal gelatine) and it is guaranteed by the kosher label. Likewise, foods that are certified as *Parve*, neutral, must not contain any ingredients of animal production (neither milk nor meat). These foods are often sought after by vegetarian and vegan customers, are the most demanded form of kosher production by non-Jewish customers,

according to companies who cater outside of the Jewish community. This brings us to the point where the significance of kosher certification for other than religious reasons is becoming apparent.

Those, who are interested in obtaining of kosher certificates must consult with the rabbinical authorities not only the composition of the product but also the technology of production, the origin of the raw materials used and allow inspection to visit or to agree with the presence of ritual supervision directly at the site of production. The issued certificates are internationally valid, applying either to the whole production or only to a part or even to a single batch of goods. The process requires transparency, consistency and cooperation of producers with the representatives of religious organization.

In addition to the certificate, which was and is, traditionally issued by the local chief rabbis of each Jewish community is now existing a possibility of obtaining kosher certificates from large multinational associations that specialize in the issue of ritually safe eating in today's global environment. The example of one of the global companies is OK Kosher [ <http://www.ok.org>]. Its logo can be found on the packaging of the products of concerns such as Nestlé, Unilever, Yoplait and many others. The organization with global reach, OK Kosher, explains to its customers that it is beyond the possibility of the individual to understand the complexity of today's food production.

In the client section, it's being explained the contemporary aim of the agency to track and understand to the usage of additives, preservatives, aroma, conservants, dyes and many chemical substances that are being used in the food industry. Under the title *What an Ingredient List Won't tell you* there is one sentence I consider to be crucial for the global success of the kosher agencies: "Since the 1950s, over 3,000 additives have been legally introduced into our food, including colourings, flavourings, and preservatives with technical or vague names (e.g. 'natural flavours')" [<http://www.ok.org/consumers/kosher-an-overview/kosher-supervision/>].

According to their own presentation, the agency possesses the knowledge, understanding and has control over modern technology. The ordinary customer has no possibilities to find out and influence the methods of food processing, the use of chemicals used for cleaning, oils used to cover the pans, the change in the recipe the producer made without specifying it on the packaging. And only after introduction the complexity of the food industry technology the agency mentioned the religion and the laws of kashrut they oversee. They act as an expert in both. In the ancient tradition of religious laws and as a well-educated food quality inspectors, winning the trust of contemporary consumers.

What we can observe here is a form and a process of commodification of expert knowledge which weakens the certainty and confidence of the individuals to decide and to choose [7] based on their own independent judgment. And it is not only about the individuals who are losing confidence and trust in the marketing communication of the companies. What is evident here is the growing impact of the global agencies who are the key player in the homogenizing process of the setting standards of the expected content, quality, tastes and visual forms.

The field research proved the producers, who are not personally linked to the local Jewish community, opt for the international kosher logo as a form of a quality certificate that increases their marketability outside of the country. “In contract not everything is contractual” stated Durkheim [7, p. 158] and in this given case the trust in known global giant is taking over the trust in the credibility of the rabbinate from cultural and social setting dissimilar to the one the consumer is coming from.

This could be perceived as a form of strategy adopted by smaller or regional companies who seek to gain some competitive advantage. Because of the ingredient control, inspection in the production site the certificate became equivalent of the certificates of quality, hygienic standards and safety. FFDE admitted the kosher labels serve as the trademark that opens access to the global market that for small to mid-range local producers would be otherwise unreachable [<http://www.foodnet.cz>]. Companies engaged in the strategy they perceive as a *Value Marketing* admit the mundane aims are the main reason why their companies started the kosher production. Under the term of preserving full anonymity of the company the interviewed managers stated they have respect and some form of personal fascination or admiration for the religious faith and the integrity of the faith and the application of the rules of kashrut to the modern production. Two out of the six companies stated the fact the kosher certificate prevented the full bankruptcy of the company. With the label they started to supply dairy products to a large global manufacturer Nestlé. One brewery after obtaining the certificate started to sell almost entire production abroad benefiting from combination of the kosher certificate and the fame of the Czech beer. The market environment creates a framework and opens possibilities for very diverse groups to meet and engage in dialog and relationship. The individuals use the consumer culture to define their sense of belonging to, or a denial of, a specific lifestyle, attitude or value models.

### **3. Quest for values and identity**

Individuals, as well as a group, use the consumer culture to define their sense of belonging or as a denial of a specific lifestyle, attitude or value models. The extensive range of consumer goods allows us to consume or refuse to consume in such a way, to demonstrate our ethical or political standpoints [8]. Part of consumers became aware of the impact of their own consumption and started to look for strategies to minimize the negative impact of overconsumption and lifestyle constructed by marketers. As high-quality goods are broadly available and therefore less prestigious, the new type of consumption is becoming more influential. The focus of the consumer is more and more on the quality not on the quantity [9]. The quality the contemporary consumer is searching for can be defined as the informed quality. The aim is to look for goods that are in balance and in accordance with the value models, image and identity of the individuals and their reference group.

The identity based on consumption, influenced by the new media is according to Petrušek [10] a significant feature that links together the society. He points to the plurality of lifestyles, new patterns of consumerism, platform economy and the shift in value models. The term *Consumer Society* starts to emerge from the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Lipovetsky the consumer society can be characterized by the quest to find affluence and comfort [11]. This type of society where the consumer culture becoming more and more dominant is linked to the eras of economic prosperity and to the development of marketing communication strategies. Marketing is aimed at the constant stimulation of the need to consume. To consume more, different, again. To consume to satisfy needs that are endlessly multiplied and reproduced.

Lipovetsky further specifies *the informed consumer* who is not looking primarily for social status but rather for the independence, mobility, experience and a good quality healthy life [11, p. 372]. In a similar way looked at the Czech consumer society Petrušek pointing out the interplay of material and spiritual values in the period of late modernity [10, p. 140, 143]. The term *ethically responsible consumer* is more commonly used for those who take into consideration the impact of his or her own purchase behaviour and who understand it as a tool to enforce some social or environmental changes and is linked with the work of Irving, Harrison and Rayner [12]. The term covers a broad spectrum of issues from the environmental problems, animal well-being to the workers' rights. The informed or the ethically responsible form of consumption can be understood as a process of inclusion into a specific reference group or a process of creating of the social identity [13]. At the same time local production and culture is preferred in this specific reference group.

According to Schwarz [13] values are beliefs linked inextricably to affect and emotions when we activate them. Values also refer to desirable goals and motivate us to take an action. In his basic model, Schwartz presents four groups of value sets. The first one is to the individual interest or personal focus: *Power, Achievement, Hedonism, Stimulation, Self-direction*. In the opposition are the values regulating the relation to the society and to the others: *Tradition, Conformity, Security*. Even though the values of *Self-direction* and *Tradition* are placed in the opposition, in the framework of the contemporary consumer culture they are both activated to ease the orientation in the fluid and constantly changing market environment. Prudký perceived deleted world values as a theoretical background and concepts that trigger the activity of the individual even in the reality of the consumer society [14].

In presented research we would like to illustrate how a group of consumers who value greatly the individual choice and self-direction is using the strict conservative tradition of a very different social group to unclutter the overwhelming reality of the market. On the theoretical level, the above-described contradiction was understood by Z. Bauman as the main characteristic of the consumer culture [15]. Consumerism values mobility and self-direction rather than stability. The excessive mobility of changing trends, never-ending newness, change of the things that were known is generated by marketing communication

in order to increase the consumption of everything, necessary as well as unnecessary goods. According to Bauman, we consume in order to establish our identities. People's lives are no longer defined by what they produce and create but by what they buy, consume, refuse to buy or refuse to purchase. Bauman also connects the contemporary consumerism with the fragmentation and instability of the communities we are part of. The fascinating concept Bauman introduced is being tested by a sociologist in order to explore the interplay of arbitrary norms of current consumerism with the values, as with a permanent element because they are an expression of cultural continuity in society and form the basis of the identity of the social whole.

#### **4. Clean or ethical eating as a lifestyle and as the search**

In recent years, some kosher certified cafeterias, bakeries, catering company, deli and food market started to emerge in Prague in residential areas. The establishment of hip kosher pop-up restaurants and craft-food productions are linked with the issues of creating communities and identities; it is helping to fulfil the need to belong. Again through consumption.

In the course of the six months, the intensive qualitative research of the local kosher market was carried. The used methodology consisted of participant observation, mystery shopping, semi-structured and unstructured interview with the producers, the end customers as well as with the institutional authorities engaged in the process of certification. The content analysis of the web pages and advertising material was carried side by side with the interviews and observations.

The first and the foremost striking finding the research brought was the use of a secular language and terminology describing what kosher means. Here I would like to present one example from many. The text is from the web page of catering company and bakery that provides kosher goods to several cafés and shops in Prague. *“The range of products of our kosher bakery is inspired by the Middle Eastern cuisine. The offer partially changes in relation to the availability of seasonal ingredients, especially fruits and vegetables. We always try to prepare for you also products without lactose, eggs, flour, and nuts (vegans, coeliacs and allergic people can appreciate this). Taste honest chocolate brownies, smooth carrot cake with cream cheese, a much-loved cheesecake, pecan cookies, hummus bi tahini with traditional pita bread or a wide range of bagels, pierogi, and savoury vegetable quiches.”* [<https://kosherfood.cz/en/>]

The term ‘Middle Eastern cuisine’, or in some cases ‘Mediterranean cuisine’, is being used to describe the concept behind the offered products. It places the food in the framework of culture and geographic locality, outside of the religious doctrines and dogmas making it more comprehensible to the secular consumers. The Mediterranean form of a diet based on olive oil, fresh fruits and vegetables, lentils and rice with a moderate amount of meat is presented by the dietologist as one of the healthiest form of diet promising the longevity. This is clearly resonating in the text that is aiming to recruit consumers outside of the Jewish community. Besides the trend of using the fresh and seasonal ingredient

the common theme linked to kosher products offer is the compliance of kosher food and diets eliminating a number of allergens. The term lactose-free is used instead of the religious term Parveh. The list continues with the other, the most frequent, allergens that are avoided as well.

The described strategy of simple, healthy cooking with a touch of ethnic origin is attractive for the clients who search for a catering suitable for a diverse group of people such as the employees of multinational companies and corporations operating in the urban setting of the capital city. As one of the event managers bluntly summarized: „*It's all inclusive and all leaving out and it's still tasty*”. By this statement she meant the food is without pork, can be without beef, can be without meat altogether, can be without eggs and dairy, can be gluten-free. It is suitable for a variety of people with food allergies and religious beliefs but not separating them into the groups. They all can eat the same menu and enjoy the taste. As was pointed out this form of catering enables to strengthen team relationship as all the team members are sharing the same food without the feeling of being excluded.

This gives us a partial answer to the question: who else is interesting in kosher products outside of the Jewish community? Besides clients of catering from international companies people who buy from a kosher deli, bakery and a small market are people who according to their own words look for the products with minimum ingredients. They search for high-quality products, healthy food, and a trusted source. They have not much faith in the honourable intention of the marketing declaration of the quality and harmlessness of food manufacturers. As common examples why they shop for kosher food is the distrust in the components defined as ‘natural’. The animal gelatine mixed into yogurts or fruit juice as well as the carmine or cochineal extract routinely added dye to the food is what they try to avoid.

The kosher products are exactly what is the well informed, hard to please consumer, finding as meeting his demands on transparent and reliable marketing. The rabbinical certificate is perceived by consumers as an independent actor in the frame of today’s market. Third party guarantee of the declared quality, origin and purity of the production. And because of the religious agenda, is perceived as independent of the marketing, because of being responsible to the higher authority. Consumers who value *Self-direction* and *Universalism* are using the value of consistent *Tradition* of the Jewish kosher supervision over the goods as a stable point to ease their individual decision making in today’s market reality.

*Clean eating* as a current consumer trend is more about the personal convictions than a form of a diet. It can introduce a variety of healthy habits into person’s eating style. But, on the other hand it may be perceived as restrictive and limiting. The basic concept of the contemporary global trend is to omit any substances that are not natural. The trend is to eat food made from the basic ingredients, naturally grown, naturally prepared. Basic of the diet are the fruit, vegetable and lean meat from the known source, naturally following the seasonal offer. This framework of presented ideas and perspectives correlates with the



contemporary practice of the kosher regulations within the global and the local markets.

Generally speaking, abstaining from eating certain foods that are understood as unclean is part of several religions with long historical tradition. What is relatively new is according to Veit “*a strong sense that ethical eating is one of the most powerful things individual can do to effect positive change*” [16]. Here, I would like to draw on Z. Bauman attribute of consumer culture, the fluidity and the excessive mobility of changing trends [15, p. 47]; it is being dealt with an ethical consumption trends in the instances where a personal religious affiliation is absent. The study of Veit presents the same explanation our respondents were giving [16]. The ethical eating provides the feeling of being in control in the overwhelming world, it extends the personal believe in slowing the climate change or stopping the animal abuse into action. The controlled eating is perceived by many as a virtue.

## **5. Concluding remarks**

Increasing connectivity of the market provides possibility of dialog and support between socio-demographic groups, each group presenting their values and standards mainly for the purposes of identity development. Not only the members of the groups are influenced by the values and tradition. Values and traditions are reinterpreted in a very different cultural setting in a search for a benefit from the values of coherent tradition. The coherency of religious tradition became attractive at the times of distrust to the contemporary marketing communication.

For the local, end consumers, we can understand their behaviour of a search for the kosher products as a search a constant, invariable points that are providing orientation and support while making their choices in the overwhelming reality of the market. They are rediscovering the Leviticus rules for their authenticity and consistent tradition of implication to the changing food market. The Leviticus became again the source of value and orientation in the personal search for quality and virtue in the process of everyday decision making and connecting the individual agency to a greater spiritual concept.

Beside the individual consumers, we can perceive the described strategy of small companies as a way they compete with local and global giants. Again at the first place very individual aim and personal focus is involved; they are open to changes, to the new ideas and concept (such the *kosher* certification for the secular company management certainly is). With their adherence to the system of globally recognized and accepted labels, they are adding to the process of global homogenization of the market. As the individual company is benefiting we can ask who is losing in this game of trust. At the first place, the local Jewish community is losing payments if the company opts for the global agency. Consequently, labels such as *The Czech Product* are losing their credit to the globally standardized tastes and aesthetics.

The kosher certificate is viewed as a third party guarantee of the declared quality and origin of the production. It is understood as being responsible to the higher authority, therefore as independent to the marketing strategies. The non-material values that are being ascribed to the production are the key elements that make the products to stand out of the general offer.

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