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Ethical Selving in Cultural Context: Fair Trade Consumption as an Everyday Ethical Practice in the UK and Germany

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L'Éthique personnelle dans un contexte culturel : la consommation de produits équitables comme éthique quotidienne au Royaume-uni et en Allemagne

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Abstract

Fairtrade consumers, by enacting their political and moral concerns through consumer choice, are at the same time constructing themselves as ethical selves. I will argue that they can only do so by drawing on cultural contexts. While fairtrade is instituted in supranational organisations and acting on a global level, there are still differences on a national level. On the basis of an Anglo-German research project, this paper seeks to map out the cultural contextualisation of fairtrade consumption on both a supranational and a national level. The paper identifies the framing role of global consumer culture and an implicit ethics of equitability inscribed in capitalist practices of exchange and specifies how these play out differently in Germany and the UK.

Résumé

En organisant ses décisions d'achat en accord avec ses valeurs politiques et morales les consommateurs de commerce équitable se construisent comme des sujets éthiques. Dans cette perspective, ils utilisent des contextes culturels. Le commerce équitable étant institutionnalisé en des organisations supranationales et agissant en niveau global, il y a autant des différences sur le niveau national. Sur la base d'une recherche anglo-allemande, cet article explore la contextualisation culturelle du commerce équitable aux niveaux supranational et national. Cette communication identifie le rôle encadrant de la culture de consommation globale et d'une éthique implicite « d'équitabilité » inscrite en pratiques d'échange capitaliste et spécifie comme celles-ci sont traduites en pratiques différemment entre le Royaume Uni et l'Allemagne.

Introduction

Fairtrade consumers engage in the construction, affirmation and communication of ethical selves and such “ethical selving” has to be understood in its cultural contexts.

Barnett, Cloke et al. (2005: 28) use the term ‘moral selving’ to describe ethical consumption as one of those practices in which individuals in ‘ordinary ethical’ routines construct life ‘by negotiating practical choices about personal conduct’. Through internal consistency of their choices (McCracken 1988: 119ff.) consumers can constitute themselves as ethical subjects. Ethics is functional in enabling social interaction by establishing accountabilities (Foucault, 1987: 118), so ethic selving always must refer to the possibility of a moral judgement by others and normally also provides a yardstick for judging on others. Therefore ethical selving is socially embedded in pre-existing discourses and practices. These provide the means for the construction and expression of ethical selves, but they also set limits to what can actually be expressed. While the possibly most relevant cultural context for fairtrade is globalised consumer capitalism, there also is a variety of more particular cultural (institutional, discursive, societal) conditions that open specific paths and pose specific obstacles for ethical selving. One such set of conditions are the distinctive pathways to fairtrade in different countries.

Cultural Context I: Global Consumer Capitalism

Fairtrade – precisely because it works ‘in and against the market’ (Brown 1993: 156) – operates from the pragmatic and moral implications of the capitalist market as a culturally and politically ‘instituted process’ (Polanyi, 1957). It therefore cannot be essentially anti-commercial, pitting market coordination against market competition (Renard, 2003: 88). I will highlight three relevant aspects of contemporary capitalism: the existence of a *global* market, consumerism as a culture of *choice*, and an ideology of *equal exchange* and *recognition*.

A Global Market

Fairtrade uses the social, material and electronic structures of global capitalism to enable critical, political, or ethical consumers to 'act at a distance' (Whatmore & Thorpe, 1997). But the global market not only facilitates fairtrade in this technical sense but also in a *cognitive* sense. Tracing processes along the flow of commodities and money (what Simmel (1990: 208) called the monetarily induced 'prolongation of the teleological series') makes it possible to construct a chain of causality between the living conditions of Southern producers and the decisions of Northern consumers. Only by this can a sense of a global moral responsibility be established (Sznajder, 2001: 15).

Consumerism as a Culture of Choice

Being built around the most abstract of media of exchange, money, consumer culture necessarily is a culture of choice (Slater, 1997: 24f.). Ethical selving is a response to individual freedom (Foucault, 1987: 117), and in a culture of choice the burden to construct a consistent character is on the individual. In a situation where citizens are conceptualised as "consumers" who are defined by their choices; the self, as Rose (1990: 27) observes, 'is not merely enabled to choose, but obliged to construe a life in terms of its choices, its powers and its values.' As Barnett, Cloke et al. (2005) argue, fairtrade organisations "govern" by offering orientation and enable them to constitute and reaffirm themselves as ethical subjects by facilitating such choices. Our respondents' accounts very much focused on how what they buy is an expression of their character disposition and their position in society.

Equitable Exchange and Labour Value

Consumer capitalism does not only set the cultural frame in which ethical selving becomes a requirement; it also supplies elements of a moral discourse of justice in exchange. Fairtrade discourses mobilise a tacit morality of reciprocity and recognition rooted in everyday market exchanges which assume that normally what one can buy is worth roughly what one has put into the economy in terms of productive contribution (Varul, 2005). Skill and intensity of effort are normally cited to explain away the (notoriously underestimated) differentials in income and spending power – but they fail to account for the minute

percentage of our incomes that go into highly labour intensive products like coffee or sugar (Brown, 1993). Fairtrade tries to redress the balance by paying a “just price” in terms of labour value (very closely along Marxian lines), reinstating the reproduction cost of labour power: covering food, shelter, health.

Providing for such basic needs through trade is also meant to communicate recognition of productive and socially useful work. That this is not just a psychological benefit but also central in guaranteeing the redistribution of power and resources has been forcefully argued by Wright & Madrid (2007). In contrast to aid, which in an unbalanced gift exchange affirms a however benevolent unequal relation, trade affirms equal mutual need. Although the delineation between aid and trade is not as clear cut in the interview responses as it is in the “official” discourse, there was a clear sense that recognition is an essential element of fairtrade.

This recognition agenda cannot, however, be fully realised as long as consumers do have the choice between the fairtrade product and the cheaper conventional product: Choosing fairtrade then still retains an aspect of charity. To minimise charitable consideration additional use-value needs to be created. One way commonly employed is to do this by offering *symbolic* use value as an accessory, as a launch pad or trigger for consumer-romantic daydreams (Campbell 1987). Fair Trade produce has an affinity to the romantic imagination as it easily connects to themes of longing: the far-away, the past, and nature (the tropics, colonial history, and rural life). The actualisation of this potential, however, tends to revoke the recognition won through trade on the level of imagery and representation as it commodifies producers and often also inadvertently employs colonialist imageries (Wright 2004, Varul 2008).

Cultural Context 2: National Consumer Capitalisms

While global consumer capitalism contextualises fairtrade both in the UK and in Germany, there are distinctive traits in both countries – which lead to markedly different outcomes, most notably the overall sales of fairtrade products in Germany being less than a third of that in the UK (Krier, 2005). The main features that have shown to be relevant in our research are differences in *consumer culture* (Deutschmann, 2006), differences in the way

that work and welfare are negotiated in what could be called *national "moral economies"* (Mau, 2003), and differences in *post-colonial/Orientalist imageries and identifications* (Said, 2003, Kontje, 2004).

Consumerisms

Observing that the postmodern economy is geared to cater for the consumption of signs, Lash and Urry (1994: 81) find that in Germany there are still strong streaks of industrial productionism. Rather than becoming fully "consumerised", German economic culture negotiated its way into an intermediate position (Kroen 2006: 260), merging 'a long-standing philosophy of quality production with a new ethos of mass consumption' (Wiesen, 2003: 152). In contrast, the British development towards consumerism is perceived to have discarded the 'privilege of the producer' once and for all (Abercrombie 1991) leading to much higher legitimacy for (seemingly) irrational "romantic" consumption, 'autonomous hedonism' (Campbell 1987: 77ff.). Being a consumer has become the central metaphor for being a free individual, a citizen equipped with the inalienable 'right to shop' (Hilton 2003: 242ff.). When it comes to influencing such citizen/consumers, instead of imposing regimes of rational conduct the preferred option now is what has been described as 'governmentality' where programmes have to link up to 'private desires for self-advancement' (Rose & Miller, 1992: 201). While such an approach can be identified in Germany as well (e.g. Varul, 2004: 65ff.) there remains a stronger appeal to rational planning through established authorities. Here the consumer is conceptualised as informed and guided by authority and expertise (Trumbull 2001) under an informal social duty to shop rationally (regarding both price and quality). But in the British case

'social *duties* attached to earlier forms of consumer citizenship have become increasingly absent in [an] officially-sanctioned consumerism, while an incremental series of practical *rights* of consumer citizenship have been conceded so that a particular type of "confident consumer" has emerged in the "modern market"' (Hilton, 2001: 244).

The 'confident consumer' was clearly present in our British respondents. Not only were accounts of purchasing decisions often focal points of how they defined themselves, who

they are and who they aspire to be. They were also highly individualistic in that the “official” fairtrade discourse was often customised, very much like the identity construction described by the governmentality approach: They pick and choose from several governmental discourses, and justify their choices in terms of their own considerations, needs, aspirations – their personality and identity. In contrast, German fairtrade shoppers relied much more on what they perceived as a unified discourse of fairtrade with clearly identifiable lead agencies (namely the labelling organisation *Transfair* and the major import organisation *Gepa*). The fairtrade label fits well into a tradition of shopping for semi-official quality assurance, alleviating the torments of choice (“*Qual der Wahl*”) – choice which British respondents seemed to relish as welcome opportunity to enact individual ethical identity and moral agency. While British consumers often talked about “*researching*” a topic (most often meaning that they checked various internet sources), German shoppers kept themselves “*informed*” by turning to the established expertise of the mentioned institutions or by asking a fairtrade shop volunteer. The reliance on fairtrade shop volunteers’ expertise must be seen in the context of the *Fachhandel* (specialist retail) model in which the expectation is that shop attendants are expected to have considerable expert knowledge and to advise customers objectively on quality and price (Spiekermann, 2006: 167). This model comes with ‘social representation and distinction’. For fairtrade shops that means that while the aim is to reach as many people as possible, the signal inadvertently sent out is one of exclusiveness of morally and aesthetically defined spaces, which has been identified as an obstacle to a more vigorous mainstreaming.

With the absence of an established network of fairtrade shops the British fairtrade movement seems to have benefited from a latecomer advantage. *Traidcraft*, one of the first and still one of the biggest fairtrade organisations in the UK, started as a catalogue business and also built up a network of volunteers (“fairtraders”) who sold and continue to sell through personal contacts, church stalls, local farmers markets etc. Being less integrated into the established retail structure, mainstreaming was a much more obvious option. The fairtraders are forced to adopt a much more consumer-oriented attitude as for them it is much more urgent to respond flexibly to individuals’ aspirations and desires. In this

respect, they too accommodated to the prevailing version of consumer culture – one in which the consumer as a chooser had emerged as the cultural hero.

A commercial presentation speaking not only to the prospective buyer's conscience but also to their desires becomes more legitimate, bringing to bear the abovementioned competitive advantage in terms of romantic consumption. The commodity aesthetics of German fairtrade goods in the meantime remains one of sober simplicity – and it was much more difficult to elicit comments on imaginative contents from our German respondents.

In the context of a rationalising consumer culture German fairtrade seems to largely confirm the LeVelly's (2006: 4) analysis that ethical consumption is geared to inculcate an element of substantive rationality into the only formally (procedurally) rational capitalist market. In British fairtrade there is a much stronger emphasis on imagination and hedonist sophistication, the ability to visualise and empathise with producers' lives and the aesthetic skill to appreciate the more subtle beauty/taste of their products. With this use of imagination and taste as markers of distinction it is clear that, although much more inclusive in terms of social milieu than the German model, the British model still carries a strong class connotation that will make it difficult to go substantially beyond the academically educated middle classes.

Capitalist equitabilities

While the capitalist “social contract” of (seemingly) equitable exchange appears universal (Kelley & Evans, 1993), there are significant variations in how it plays out differently in different countries. In the British case the underlying expectation seems to be that if the market is not distorted it generally returns the value of the labour put into it. Regulation is only seen as acceptable if a certain existential minimum no longer is achieved (Mau 2003). While the British liberal tradition views markets as ideal providers of freedom and justice, in the German corporatist, social conservative tradition, they are functional for social aims like “social peace” to be achieved in a “social market economy” as distinct from a “free market economy”. Drawing on a corporatist model of service (Biernacki, 1995) in Germany a fixed relation between work and pay was taken out of the market process into an administrative/organisational logic. In this setting the welfare state provides not only for a

social minimum standard but also, to an extent, for status maintenance within a more conservative social structure (Mau, 2003).

Regarding fairtrade it is quite obvious why this does not translate into different ideas about *how much* producers should receive: the status maintenance in question coincides with the social minimum. But it does make a difference in how the fair price is *legitimized*. The emphasis in the British discourse on trade injustice is on a failure of the global liberal market to achieve what it normally is expected to because of externally induced imbalances such as monopolies and unfair tariff systems. Furthermore, the failing free market is to be remedied not by external means but by itself: through free and informed consumer choice (e.g. Traidcraft, n.d.). The task before the fairtrade movement thus is, as Nicholls and Opal (2004: 31) put it, to make ‘the free trade system work the way it is supposed to’.

While for British fairtrade organisations the status as ‘successful business’ is not only unproblematic but something to be proud of, German organisations like Gepa consistently play down the commercial aspect of their operations, understanding the market in terms of entitlement (*Anspruch*) (Gepa, 2008).

Our interview material reflects the differences in the respective moral economies behind fairtrade in their references to producers. For British respondents the ideal mainly was to enable them to set themselves up as sustainable *business operations* while the German respondents tended to reference them as *workers* with a set of guaranteed rights.

Orientalisms and versions of anti-conquest

Fairtrade discourses are markedly different in the way they relate to and distance themselves from the colonialism in visions of ‘anti-conquest’, which Pratt (1992: 7) identifies as ‘strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony’. Anti-conquest enables fairtrade marketing to romanticise products and producers by drawing ‘on a long Western tradition of Orientalism’ (Johnston, 2002: 50).

In German Orientalism there is more ambivalence about its positioning between East and West, with tendencies to both identify with European domination and “Oriental” authenticity (Kontje, 2004). In contrast in the British Imperial imagination ambivalence of

identity normally is cleared up in the end (McClintock, 1995). The two sides even in interaction affirm their otherness. Pratt (1992: 80ff.) shows how in the British imagination equitable commercial reciprocity fulfilled the function of anti-conquest – and the latest echo in this tradition can be seen in the stylisation of Anita Roddick, founder of the Body Shop, as such a trader-hero (Kaplan, 1995).

A figure that always was in the background of German discourses is that of the development worker who at once embodies superior guidance and identification with those supported, thus blurring the distinction between leadership by fairtrade organisations and autochthonous initiative. For example, in the Transfair (2004) brochure on coffee the featured producer is portrayed as one who has, through education by the fairtrade organisation, acquired a position of pedagogical leadership within her community – more or less incorporating the northern development worker in a native body, embodying ethical principles of responsibility, industry and thrift that match the self-image of the (German) fairtrade consumer.

Implications

Fairtrade consumption is embedded into a cultural context of global consumer capitalism which informs the way people think about the extent of their responsibility, what constitutes a fair exchange, and how they construct themselves as ethical consumer/citizens. This more globally shared context is modified by nationally specific cultures of consumption, moral economies and historically emerged postcolonial imaginations. Both the commercial success and the ethical viability of fairtrade consumption as technique of ethical selving must be assessed against the background of these contexts.

German attempts to emulate the more successful British commercialisation so far appear clumsy. It is difficult to see how a product whose essence is that it costs more will integrate into a retail culture that strongly moralises rational price awareness. On the other hand, there also appears to be a class barrier that fairtrade products will find difficult to cross in the British case. Taking this into account there are developments in the UK that go beyond the approach from (middle class) consumer choice. Under the “Fairtrade City” scheme

institutional suppliers are gradually moving to a fairtrade-only policy (Malpass et al., 2007) and some supermarkets have begun to take non-fairtrade alternatives off the shelves. It may well be that such an approach is more transferable as it might in fact be more compatible to the agency-led approach in Germany than to the UK situation itself.

The success of fairtrade hinges not only on redistribution of wealth but also on the provision of recognition. In the UK both the centrality of both the market in the moral economy and the centrality of commerce in anti-conquest are functional in communicating respect. Commercialisation in itself is *not* the central problem that threatens the recognition agenda. To the contrary: recognition as market participants is the centre piece of the idea of “trade not aid”. Where British consumers tried to distance themselves from charity it was from the perspective of an ideal commercial exchange relationship between autonomous market subjects. Respondents were sensitive to imagery and discourses that in a paternalistic way place producers either in a service class position.

The danger is that the romantic marketing reactivates colonialist ‘commodity racism’ (McClintock, 1995: 53), as happened in a recent Divine chocolate campaign – which many of our respondents in the UK characterised as borderline racist and sexist in its association of African women with chocolate (also cf. Varul 2008). The self-conception of German fairtrade as anti-commercial makes similar lapses less likely. But this does not mean that German fairtrade marketing is immune from colonial repercussions. Such tend to come more in the form of a patronising portrayal of producers in pedagogical discourses. While British fairtrade ethics may be under threat from over-commercialisation, German fairtrade ethics seems to suffer from under-commercialisation.

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