

Title

The political rationalities of fair trade consumption in the United Kingdom

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Keywords

Fair trade, consumption, alternative economic spaces, civic activism, political participation.

Abstract

This paper situates the analysis of fair trade consumption in the context of debates about civic activism and political participation. It argues that fair trade consumption should be understood as a political phenomenon which, through the mediating action of organizations and campaigns, makes claims upon states, corporations and institutions. This argument is made by way of a case study of Traidcraft, a key player in the fair trade movement in the United Kingdom. The study focuses on how Traidcraft approaches and enrolls its supporters, and how these supporters understand their own consumption and other practices.

1. ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIC SPACES, NEW SPACES OF PUBLIC ACTION

Academic and activist discourses of capitalist globalization and rampant neoliberalism have provoked increasing interest in the economic and political potential of various ‘alternative economic spaces’.¹ This includes research on the growth of ethical finance, alternative food networks, the social economy, and alternative trading systems.² One sector to have received considerable attention has been the growth of fair trade. Fair trade has been described as ‘market-driven ethical consumption’.³ It is a movement which seeks to harness the mechanisms of the market to address socio-economic inequalities and environmental harms associated with the global economic system.⁴

Academic literatures in business, management, and marketing studies, as well as fair trade organizations themselves, tend to distinguish fair trade from ‘ethical trade’.⁵ Ethical trade focuses on labor conditions in mainstream production and distribution networks. Ethical trade campaigns display significant differences between, for example, the US and the UK.⁶ In the UK, the most visible of these campaigns is the Ethical Trading Initiative, an alliance of trade unions and NGOs focused on enforcing corporate codes of practice concerning working conditions and living wages in supply chains, whose corporate partners include major retailers such as Gap and The Body Shop. In the United States, ethical trade campaigns have tended to be more fragmented organizationally.⁷

Fair trade focuses on the development of alternative spaces of production, trade, and consumption.⁸ The international fair trade movement consists of certification agencies, producer organizations and co-operatives, trading networks, and retailers. Since 2001, this movement has defined fair trade in the following way:

Fair Trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency, and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers – especially in the South. Fair Trade organizations (backed by consumers) are engaged actively in supporting producers, awareness raising, and campaigning for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade.⁹

The goals of fair trade include improving the livelihoods and well-being of producers “by improving market access, strengthening producer organizations, paying a better price, and providing continuity in the trading relationship”; promoting development opportunities “for disadvantaged producers, especially women and indigenous people”; awareness raising among consumers “of the negative effects on producers of international trade so that they exercise their purchasing power positively”; providing an example of “partnership in trade through dialogue, transparency, and respect”; campaigning “for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade”; and protecting human rights “by promoting social justice, sound environmental practices, and economic security”.¹⁰ Fair trade organizations pursue these goals through trading activities, but also through awareness raising and campaigning.

In the UK, the growth of fair trade consumption builds on a history of consumer-oriented campaigning by development and human rights organizations such as Oxfam and Amnesty. Oxfam’s first charity shop was opened in Oxford in 1948, and there are now more than 750 Oxfam shops throughout the UK, selling second-hand books, clothes, records, and other items, as well as a selection of fairly-traded products such as tea,

coffee, and chocolate. Oxfam in turn is one part of a network of companies and organizations, including Cafédirect, Tropical Wholefoods, and the Fairtrade Foundation, who have, over the last two decades, actively constructed networks for the production, distribution, marketing, and retailing of fair trade commodities. Traidcraft, the focus of our analysis here, is also part of this network. The network combines a range of organizations: some specializing in campaigning work, such as Oxfam; some specializing in marketing initiatives, such as the Fairtrade Foundation; others involved in business activities, such as Traidcraft – although none of these activities are mutually exclusive. These organizations also have different forms of membership base: Oxfam’s network of shops depends upon volunteers; Traidcraft has an extensive network of volunteers buying and selling fair trade products in schools, churches, and other non-commercial sites. This organizational framework is, in turn, embedded in broader institutional networks through which fair trade campaigning has been disseminated and from which support is drawn. This includes a history of fair trade activism in British religious organizations. More recently, fair trade campaign organizations such as the Fairtrade Foundation have cooperated with the leading labor union representative body in the UK, the Trade Union Congress, in seeking to ensure that *fair trade* activities support the *ethical trading* initiatives around labor rights of national and international labor union organizations.

In the European context, it is common to identify fair trade as part of a broader growth of so-called ethical consumerism or political consumerism.¹¹ In political economy and critical social science, the predominant analytical frame for understanding both fair trade and ethical trade is that of commodity chains and value chains, focusing on the links and connections between *producers* in the South and *consumers* in the North.¹² Most

research on fair trade focuses on the impacts of initiatives on producer communities. Fair trade consumption remains an under-researched area, and there is a widespread assumption that the growth of fair trade is driven by and dependent upon secular trends in consumer demand towards more ‘ethical’ and ‘responsible’ forms of product and service. The people who buy and sell fair trade products in the North remain curiously abstract, detached, even placeless actors in academic analyses.

In this paper, we use a case study of the organizational rationalities and practical actions articulated by Traidcraft, a leading fair trade organization in the UK, to challenge the assumption that the actors involved in the growth of fair trade markets are best conceptualized as ‘consumers’. The explicit focus of fair trade initiatives is to enhance democratization, empowerment, and participation. This is widely acknowledged in literature on fair trade in the global South, in analyses of the impacts on producer communities.¹³ However, the same focus on the civic, political, and social objectives of fair trade in the global North remains undeveloped, constrained by the persistent view that the key actors in these practices are fair trade *consumers*. We aim to resituate the analysis of fair trade in the context of debates about civic activism and political participation. Alongside other forms of ethical consumption¹⁴ or political consumerism¹⁵, we argue that fair trade should be understood as a political phenomenon which, through the mediating action of organizations, coalitions, and campaigns, makes claims on states, corporations, and international institutions. Understood in this way, the growth of fair trade consumption in the global North works to mobilize support, raise funds, and raise awareness about issues of global justice, development, and inequality.

2. DISPLACING THE CONSUMER

Both mainstream and critical academic analyses of fair trade share a common conceptualization of the activities of the agents of fair trade consumption as consumers. They assume that the growth, potential, and limits of fair trade are determined by the dynamics of consumer demand, understood in terms of the individual choices of rational utility maximizers. Positive evaluations of fair trade and other ethical consumer initiatives emphasize the potential of consumers to act creatively in the “interstices” of the globalized economy in pursuit of environmental concerns, human rights, or labor solidarity.¹⁶ Green or ethical consumers are seen as the drivers of market change towards more virtuous or fair systems through the mechanism of informed choices. The citizen-consumer can, on this interpretation, be seen as acting as an agent of regulation through the market, stepping into the vacuum left by the apparent retreat of state actors from this function.

This positive view of the role of citizen-consumers is mirrored by a more critical attitude to consumer-oriented forms of social action. The more pessimistic view of the potential of ‘shopping to change the planet’¹⁷ sees the growth of ethical consumerism, sustainable consumption initiatives, and fair trade as parasitic upon and further contributing to a thoroughgoing individualization of civic, public culture, which legitimizes the hollowing-out of the responsibilities and accountabilities of nation-states. Low and Davenport argue that the mainstreaming of fair trade has given impetus to the growth of discourses of ethical consumerism that undermine projects of collective mobilization.¹⁸ On this view, ethical consumerism is an individualizing phenomenon

which lacks a collective dimension.¹⁹ It empowers some – those with spending power to make their ‘vote’ in the marketplace effective – at the expense of the egalitarianism of formal, public, representative institutions. The ‘alternative’ potentials of fair trade are, on this interpretation, limited by the reliance on the conventions and codes of (post)modern consumerism which, in the final analysis, are seen to reproduce the logic of market-driven capital accumulation and the crisis of democratic accountability.²⁰ This critique of the articulation of consumerist discourse with campaigns against global poverty and in support of trade justice and environmental sustainability remains tied to an image of the consumer as the key agent of market change – it just puts a more negative interpretation on this phenomenon.

This shared analytical focus on consumer demand as the driving force of the growth of fair trade suggests that the only strategy pursued by the fair trade movement is further economic expansion. For example, the development potential of international fair trade is seen to depend on finding ways of maintaining and expanding consumer demand;²¹ and innovative marketing strategies are thought to be the best mechanism for taking advantage of market opportunities.²² This in turn generates an evaluative framework in which the problem of ‘mainstreaming’ is understood in narrowly economic terms: does the shift from ‘niche’ to ‘mainstream’ retailing threaten to the reabsorb original aims into market-logic?²³ Low and Davenport go so far as to suggest that one effect of the mainstreaming of fair trade is that, as they put it, the medium gets confused with the message.²⁴ By this, they mean that ‘shopping for change’ increasingly comes to be seen as the primary mechanism of socio-economic change, rather than as one aspect of a broader movement focused on trade reform and trade justice. And, in turn, the ‘dilution’

of fair trade ideals is always already inscribed within the growth of fair trade or similar alternative economic practices as long as they are conceptualized as primarily economic means of achieving economic objectives.

Our argument is that the assumption that the key driver of the expansion of fair trade consumption is ‘the consumer’ needs to be problematized. Looked at in more detail, ethical consumption campaigning in the global North turns out not to seek to mobilize people as individualistic consumers. In contrast to the view of ethical consumption as a substitute for other forms of more collective engagement, we argue here that there is a spectrum of actions through which consumption is problematized as both an object and medium of ethical commitment and political participation. This spectrum ranges from more individualized, discrete activities such as purchasing fairly-traded products in the supermarket, to more sociable practices such as involvement in local campaigns to have schools, Universities, or towns certified as ‘fair trade’, through to explicitly political engagement, whether through individualized petition signing or collective involvement in mass demonstrations. Even the most individualized and consumerist of these activities is, then, connected to a broader range of actions. This connection is sometimes directly undertaken by the same person who buys fair trade – they might also be signing petitions, donating money, boycotting other goods, joining local campaigns, attending meetings, or going on marches. We will explore this repertoire of actions further below. But even in the case of anonymous consumers who are responsible for the steady growth in fair trade consumption in the UK, it is important to recognize that this market for fair trade is not a spontaneous response to ‘revealed preferences’. The possibility of exercising individual choice as a *fair trade consumer* is made possible by intermediary trading, marketing,

campaigning, and educational organizations with diverse modes of membership and support in civil society.²⁵ Furthermore, the growth of fair trade retail markets in the UK is closely associated with a pluralization of campaigning strategies by fair trade organizations. Far from focusing solely on growing commercial retail markets in fair trade, it is increasingly the case that fair trade initiatives are aimed at transforming infrastructures of collective consumption through which the ‘choice sets’²⁶ available to consumers are realigned to support fair trade objectives.²⁷ The growth of markets for fair trade products has been associated with the development of new forms of collective, organized political action that remains focused on questions of poverty, sustainability, and justice, and which takes states, international agencies, and multinational corporations as objects of contention. It is therefore important to acknowledge “the ways in which the Fair Trade movement encourages actors to engage in different forms of social action”.²⁸ In order to fully develop the insight that fair trade facilitates participatory forms of social action, the analytical focus on consumers as agents of fair trade consumption needs to be displaced.

In Section 3, we look at how the fair trade movement seeks to mobilize support in the UK through various mechanisms, some directly related to consumption practices, some less so. We focus on one organization, Traidcraft, a key player in the fair trade movement in the UK. Through the case study of Traidcraft, we throw light upon the political rationality of fair trade consumption as it has developed in the UK. We show that it is far from obvious that the vector of engagement is primarily people’s roles as consumers in the marketplace. In Section 4, we look at how Traidcraft operates at grassroots level by drawing on existing social networks and civic associations to draw

people into new arenas of public participation with global reach. We focus here on the understandings of participants themselves – of ‘Fairtraders’ and their customers – to demonstrate that the forms of subjectivity implicated in fair trade initiatives are more social and sociable than those suggested by automatic recourse to the ubiquitous figure of ‘the consumer’.

3. MANAGING FAIR TRADE, MOBILISING NETWORKS

The problematization of everyday consumption has become central to public debates around environmental futures, global human and labor rights, development, and trade justice.²⁹ This process draws together policy-makers, regulators, social movement campaigners, and corporations around a shared rationality that recognizes that transforming patterns of consumption, markets, and trade requires addressing people as more than just rational utility maximizers. Instead, interventions increasingly start from recognition of the complex folding of commodity consumption into affective and material infrastructures of everyday life. Levels of commodity consumption are not straightforwardly sustained by consumer demand at all. Firstly, a great deal of consumption is embedded in practices where people are acting as parents, caring partners, football fans, or good friends.³⁰ Some consumption is used to sustain these sorts of relationships: giving gifts, buying school lunches, getting hold of this season’s new strip. And, secondly, quite a lot of consumption is done as the background to these activities, embedded in all sorts of infrastructures (transport, energy, water) over which people have little or no direct influence as ‘consumers’.³¹

Fair trade campaigning in the UK is one example of this emerging problematization of consumption as embedded in social practices and routines. For example, in the UK the Fairtrade Foundation (FTF) deploys a range of devices to enlist support and transform consumption practices. This has included the extension of fair trade certification beyond commodities to various institutional actors such as schools, churches, universities, and even localities. The evolution of fair trade certification illustrates that sometimes fair trade campaigning deploys devices that are presented as extending choices to consumers, but these are primarily used as a means of raising awareness amongst a broad general public and generating media attention. But campaigns also engage at an institutional level to change the ways in which consumption is regulated at the level of whole systems of provisioning. This combination indicates that fair trade networks succeed not by linking ‘Third World producers’ with placeless ‘First World consumers’, but by articulating social networks and their members into new transnational geographies of place.³²

The development of fair trade certification in the UK illustrates the need to resituate the analysis of fair trade consumption in diverse social networks, rather than persisting in presenting it (positively or negatively) as primarily a form of consumer agency. To this end, we present here a case study of fair trade networks in and around the city of Bristol in the south-west of England, drawing on empirical research into the role of Traidcraft, one of the UK’s leading fair trade advocacy organizations, undertaken between Autumn 2003 and Spring 2006. Primary data collection included desk-based investigation into Traidcraft’s development, using the organization’s archive at its head office in Gateshead in Northeast England, and interviews with key actors in Traidcraft’s

national management, policy, and business operations. It also involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with local 'Fairtraders' and Traidcraft customers. This research into local Traidcraft networks used the organization's three local 'Key Contacts' in Bristol to recruit 15 further research subjects. These informants provide a picture of two distinct but overlapping local networks of fair trade activism, one centered on church-based networks in North Somerset and South Bristol, the other linked closely to networks in South Gloucestershire and North Bristol.

Traidcraft was formed in 1979, emerging from the Christian development charity Tearfund. It is a trading business whose founding principles are to provide a Christian response to poverty through trade. It was set up to distribute fairly-traded food, household, and craft products throughout the UK. Its initial system for distributing products was through a series of local representatives – 'Fairtraders' – who volunteered to sell stocks of fair trade goods in their area, as well as to distribute mail order catalogues and generally raise awareness of fair trade issues. There are now some 5000 volunteers in Traidcraft's national network. 'Fairtraders' are not, it should be noted, straightforwardly 'consumers': they buy fair trade products from Traidcraft, and then sell them on through their own social networks, enrolling friends, parishioners, and work colleagues as consumers in more or less inadvertent ways.

While Christian principles remain central to Traidcraft's operations, it is formally committed to working with people and organizations from any faith background, or none at all.³³ As fair trade markets have grown, Traidcraft has become a leading fair trade brand in the UK. It has mainstreamed its distribution through involvement with fair trade product lines such as Café Direct and GeoBars, that are marketed through high street

retailers and supermarkets. As locally based 'fair trading' has grown, Traidcraft has established a number of Key Contacts in localities, who provide wholesaling and information services for Fairtraders working at ground level in churches, schools, and workplaces. In 2005, Traidcraft sourced craft, food, and clothing products from approximately 100 producer groups in more than 30 countries, and sold them in the UK through almost 5000 volunteers. These volunteers bulk-buy products to sell to friends, neighbors, work colleagues, and fellow churchgoers (accounting for about half of all sales), and through supermarkets and wholesalers, independent retailers, and mail order/e-commerce facilities, accounting for the other half.

The development of Traidcraft's trading business practices over time has been associated with organizational shifts in its charitable and political activities. It is a founder member of the International Fair Trade Association and the European Fair Trade Association, and in 1992 was one of the founding organizations behind the formation of the Fairtrade Foundation (FTF) in the UK, along with CAFOD, Christian Aid, Oxfam, New Consumer magazine, and the World Development Movement. Traidcraft is not, then, simply a business organization. It aims to operate at three levels: building up trade directly; developing an infrastructure that can deliver business development services and support to marginalized groups; and working at a policy level to help governments support poverty-reducing trade and to help governments in international trade negotiations.³⁴ Given the multidimensional nature of Traidcraft's activities, it is appropriate to consider its role in networks of transnational advocacy around issues of development, global poverty, and trade justice in addition to its status as a model of alternative trading or a paradigm of the virtuous business organization. This shift of

perspective reveals that Traidcraft's guiding rationality does not simply reproduce the notion that the power of markets can serve as substitutes for concerted collective action by states, international agencies, NGOs, or social movement organizations if brought under the sway of appropriately virtuous 'consumer choice'. Rather, Traidcraft functions as one intermediary organization within a broader set of networks which provide pathways through which relatively individualized actions are articulated with more collectivized modes of action and, in the process, help to shape new forms of public life and alternative visions of economic futures.³⁵

Traidcraft's role as an intermediary actor in networks of civic activism and political participation can be conceptualized along the lines suggested by Pattie et al in their extensive analysis of civic life in the UK.³⁶ They distinguish between three types of 'activism': individualistic activism (e.g. wearing a campaign badge, buying fairly-traded coffee); contact activism (e.g. writing to a Member of Parliament, signing a petition); and collective activism (e.g. attending a public demonstration, joining a trade union). Traidcraft presents its activities along each of these three dimensions, coinciding with its distinct organizational division between its trading activities, its charitable activities, and its lobbying and campaigning activities. Each of these three organizational dimensions is translated into a simple mode of personal action that be easily undertaken by ordinary people: "You buy – and we can trade; you donate – and we can support; you campaign – and we can influence".³⁷ The 'buying' aspect of this formula is managed through Traidcraft plc, the trading arm of The Traidcraft Foundation. The 'giving' aspect is related to the work of Traidcraft Exchange, founded in 1986 to generate charitable funding to support capacity-building work in the Global South and awareness-raising in

the Global North. When people fill out a catalogue order with Traidcraft plc, for example, they can elect to make a donation to Traidcraft Exchange at the same time. These dimensions of Traidcraft's operations therefore facilitate forms of 'individualistic activism'. But Traidcraft also provides opportunities for Fairtraders or fair trade customers to engage in forms of 'contact' and 'collective' activism too. Via its website and regular mailings, it encourages people to express support for campaigns through formatted emails, postcards, and letters. The Traidcraft Speaker Scheme provides volunteers with the opportunity to present at school assemblies or in the classroom, to give sermons in churches, or to appear on local radio or news. And it provides a number of pedagogic resources to assist these volunteers, including interactive games, videos and DVDs, maps, information sheets, prayers, and sermon outlines.

These forms of mundane 'contact' and 'collective' activism are closely related to the work of Traidcraft's Policy Unit, established in 1998. This formalization of Traidcraft's advocacy and lobbying activities followed in part from the development of the organization's internal financial resources. It also reflected a response to the new opportunities for access to government following the election of a Labor government in 1997; for example, Traidcraft quickly became part of the Department of Trade and Industry's Trade Policy Consultative Forum. But the policy and advocacy activities of Traidcraft are also indicative of a long-standing acknowledgement that "one relatively small trading organization cannot solve the problems of the world on its own".³⁸ In both the UK and at the EU level, Traidcraft has succeeded in gaining 'standing' as one representative organization with a voice on trade issues. It is also part of networks involved in lobbying policy-makers and legislators. For example, Traidcraft is part of the

steering group of the Corporate Responsibility (CORE) Coalition set up in 2001, and a member organization of the Trade Justice Movement (TJM) formed in 2000. In 2005 and 2006, CORE and TJM coordinated a media and lobbying campaign to amend the Company Reform Law Bill during its passage through Parliament. This campaign focuses on demands that UK companies be made legally accountable for their activities overseas, through mandatory auditing and monitoring procedures, and by allowing non-UK citizens and residents to take legal action in UK courts to seek redress for harm and injustice caused by UK-based companies in their own countries. This campaign is just one example of the increasingly prevalent strategic phenomena of NGO coalition-formation around particular issues, drawing together organizations focused on development, human rights, trade justice, and environment into contingent networks of advocacy.³⁹ This sort of advocacy at national and transnational scales is, though, sustained by more localized organized advocacy. Traidcraft is an organization that can draw on a committed support-base to represent the organization in various local and regional networks, such as the South Gloucestershire Fair Trade Network or the Bristol Trade Justice Group in our case study. It is through these networks that volunteers come to participate in numerous forms of collective action, including organizing Jubilee 2000 debt campaign events or attending public demonstrations during the Make Poverty History campaign of 2005.

Traidcraft's articulation of its volunteer network with national and transnational coalitions illustrates a broader political rationality operating in policy and advocacy fields concerned with issues of consumption, markets, poverty, and sustainability. Think-tanks and advocacy organizations increasingly argue that the key to influencing consumption practices is to intervene in processes of shared learning through peer groups and social

networks.⁴⁰ This political rationality recognizes that people's motivations as 'consumers' are not necessarily individualized at all, but are embedded in networks of sociability. This is indicated by the recognition that transforming practices depends on the 'discursive elaboration' of existing habits and routines.⁴¹ This understanding is already well established in ethical consumer activism, and is exemplified in fair trade by Traidcraft. Rather than seeking to change people's opinions and preferences, Traidcraft seeks to *extend* people's existing dispositions into new areas: "We used to try and lead people to think and act in particular ways. Now we try and respond to people and provide outlets for their energy and commitments".⁴²

An example of this focus on developing people's 'energies and commitments' is Traidcraft's *GeoActivist* initiative. The initiative is led by an interactive web-site⁴³ which includes the GeoActivist Personality Test (Figure 1). The GeoActivist initiative seeks to enroll "healthy lifestyle advocates, walkers, runners, cyclists, world explorers, and fair trade activists" as fundraisers, through organized sponsored walks, rides, and runs, thereby connecting existing leisure and lifestyle commitments to concerns with trade justice and global poverty. It is an example of Traidcraft's sensitivity as an organization to the differentiated practices, resources, commitments, and concerns that lead people to support fair trade principles. It also reflects an explicit concern to widen its support base by hooking into existing networks:

We have the geo-activists, which is quite new and is used for raising our profile at various sporting events such as the Great North Run, the Great South Run, etc. So that is one way of doing it. But also, just when we target churches we will specifically target the material so that it will not necessarily lean away from the older person, but the graphics that we show on there

might be showing younger people at work or working with children at the church to help promote the product. We are getting very involved in school groups now with our Young Cooperative scheme, which is aimed at middle schools and upwards. Ministers of religion are one of our targets over the next few years to increase the number of Fairtraders from church-based backgrounds. So we will target ministers, who again we will explain to them what we are about and they will hopefully explain to their congregation what we are about. It is not specifically aimed at the younger people but a lot of the materials that we produce will actually give that impression if you like.⁴⁴

This account of the variety of strategies for enrolling supporters provides a clear sense of the organizational focus on using key intermediaries (e.g. ministers of religion) and institutional sites (e.g. schools) to enlist individuals into participatory practices in order to sustain and grow Traidcraft's volunteer network. It underscores the argument we are developing here: the development of fair trade consumption in the UK does not aim simply to enroll people as 'consumers', but rather addresses them as members of varied social networks with the aim of extending their commitments into their consumption habits and channeling their energies into recruiting friends, family, work colleagues, or fellow parishioners.

Traidcraft remains most active in church-based networks. Churches are key 'spaces of fair trade' in the UK, perhaps only matched by Oxfam shops. There are widespread variations in levels of fair trade activism between churches and denominations, but many churches provide social spaces through which new customers, Fairtraders, and supporters can be recruited, and through which fair trade can be diffused into other social and institutional sites in local areas – schools, clubs, unions. Amongst the respondents in our

case study, it was a common experience to have first come across fair trade through interactions with Traidcraft representatives who belonged to the same church networks. Traidcraft recognizes that word-of-mouth is a basic way in which fair trade networks extend into existing social networks and civic associations: “The majority of our new Fairtraders come through word of mouth recommendation”.⁴⁵ One local Fairtrader, Emma, described this as a basic tactic she has used herself:

I think it’s certainly the best way of spreading their message by getting people to, local people to then spread it further. It’s kind of, it’s filtering out again, it’s branching out. If they only operated through catalogues I think it would be, they would have much less support, because a lot of it is word-of-mouth and friends doing this and so-and-so talking about that, and just seeing the products and being able to get them easily and make, and them being easily accessible. I think people then do see, would try something from Traidcraft on a much more casual basis than they would if they had to then order it from a catalogue or make any commitment or something and pay post and packing and all that sort of thing.⁴⁶

Identifying and recruiting key intermediaries and facilitating social networking are key aspects of the organizational rationality of Traidcraft as it has developed and grown. In the next section, we look at how these mechanisms of enrollment operate locally. This will reveal that local fair trade activism is not only oriented to the economic objective of growing fair trade markets, but is instrumental in the development of multi-dimensional patterns of political action into which Traidcraft and its Fairtraders are woven.

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4. DOING FAIR TRADE: BUYING, GIVING, CAMPAIGNING

The previous section showed that strategies to extend fair trade consumption do not necessarily aim to enroll people as ‘consumers’. In this section, we show that people who engage actively with fair trade consumption activities similarly do not do so by recognizing themselves as ‘consumers’, but rather use consumption practices to express existing commitments to various ethical and political projects. The focus on ‘the consumer’ as the key agent in fair trade consumption tends to hide from view the relations between fair trade consumption and other forms of civic and political action. In this section, we focus on two overlapping networks of local fair trade activism in the South-West of England. We examine the way in which participants in these networks understand their own activities, and find that various identities are at work, but rarely if ever that of ‘consumer’.

As an organization rooted in Christian principles, churches and faith-communities are the key social networks in which Traidcraft is embedded:

The majority of Fairtraders sell in church and a number of their customers will be fellow church goers and that will range from people who are very, very much wanting to buy the product and will buy it regularly in fair-sized quantities, to other people who will see the stall at the back of the church and think I have to do my little bit and they will buy a jar of coffee and nothing else.⁴⁷

It is no surprise, then, to find that amongst participants in Traidcraft networks, the motivation for buying or selling fair trade products was often closely wrapped up with

individuals' Christian faith commitments. For many of the research subjects in our study (although not all), doing fair trade represents one route through which they feel able to express the integrity of their faith identities in everyday ways.⁴⁸ However, our research subjects tended to reflect on the relationship between their faith and their involvement in fair trade in a particular discursive register. While often acknowledging that, for them personally, faith and church membership were important factors in their fair trade consumption activities, they just as often insisted that this was not a necessary relationship, either for them or others. For example, Sarah, a fair trade customer from North Bristol, felt that "It just seems the moral thing to do. I just believe in the ethos of what it's about".⁴⁹ Likewise, Liz, a fair trade customer in North Somerset, acknowledged the importance of her involvement in the church, but insisted "but that's not why I support fair trade. I do it for ethical reasons. I think it's a really good idea".⁵⁰ Liz felt that ethical reasons and faith motivations were not the same thing:

How is it different? Well if I didn't go to, if I wasn't a Christian, I would still want to do it, yes, because I do care about the world and everyone in it, I don't just think about my own family, my own village, my own country. I think we should help people in the Third World, and it's not right that a lot of people are making money at their expense [...]. If I wasn't a Christian I would still support fair trade, yes, because I have a social conscience and I care about people and I don't think it's right that they should be taken advantage of.⁵¹

Another respondent, Erika, a fair trade customer and activist in local schools, expressed a similar view:

No, I will support any organization. My own motivation might be my faith, support might be Christian, but anybody with an interest in humanity I suppose, any faith I think would be, I would support just about as much. It's the outcome that counts. I'm not a missionary.⁵²

These reflections on the relationship between personal faith, church membership, and involvement in fair trade networks indicate that participants in local fair trade activities have a strong sense of the contingency of this relationship between faith and fair trade. These respondents recognize that the relationship between fair trade and church membership or personal faith is not a natural, necessary, or automatic one. This partly reflects a sensitivity about over-identifying fair trade with Christian faith:

Movements that are very ideologically based, or too faith (faith in that sense being an ideology I suppose), they can be quite inflexible and become a bit strident later, where once something reaches a certain momentum, it may be more practical and more useful to have a bit more realism and compromise.⁵³

But the acknowledgment of the contingency of the relationship between faith and fair trade is also a reflection of the experience of many of our research subjects of having themselves had to work hard amongst their own church communities to encourage the adoption of fair trade practices. Far from being obvious, the recourse to the discourse of faith is a strategic option that can serve a useful purpose in persuading other church-goers to support fair trade. For Traidcraft representatives and committed Fairtraders, a shared discourse of faith can often provide an effective way of translating their commitments to

fair trade and trade justice into these institutional social spaces, in which an overtly 'political' address might not necessarily succeed:

Well I don't think you have to be a Christian to want to support fair trade, but that was the way I persuaded the people at the church that it was the right thing to do, because I think it was easier for them to come to terms with it, looking at it in that context, than as a wider issue. I mean, there are political arguments for doing it too, I feel, but that wasn't the way to persuade them, so I didn't bother with that.⁵⁴

Sue's reflections indicate that it should not be assumed that the fair trade movement has a natural home in church-based networks. These participants have a strong sense of the hard work involved in the active transformation of these networks into distinctive, novel communities of 'global feeling' focused on issues of trade justice and global poverty. Like Sue, Edna has harnessed Christian discourse when appropriate to persuade people to support fair trade, downplaying the 'political' aspects because 'political' "was a bit of a dirty word within the church": "We were looked on a little bit with some sort of suspicion. It was very difficult to get fair trade into a lot of churches".⁵⁵ At the same time, Fairtraders are keen to extend fair trade beyond the social spaces of the church, and sometimes even keen to loosen the association between fair trade and Christian faith.

For members of these fair trade networks in and around Bristol, involvement in fair trade consumption is not motivated by an abstract sense of 'consumer power'. They are quite realistic about the limits of consumer activism on its own. Their involvement tends to follow as an adjunct of thicker forms of identification and modes of sociability. This finding is underscored by their acute sense of the potential and limits of fair trade to

transform patterns of global trade on its own. Our respondents had few illusions about the magical power of consumer demand to shift markets, corporations, or governments. Debbie, one of Traidcraft's Key Contacts in Bristol, sounded almost pessimistic on this score:

I could be wrong. I'd like to be wrong. I don't think it will actually overturn the desires and aspirations of the corporations. I think they've got at the moment far too strong a grip, through governments.⁵⁶

This view seems to beg the question of why people would engage in fair trade buying and selling in the first place. Sarah provides a nuanced sense of why she felt it worthwhile to do so:

Consumers give their voice, don't they, by what they buy they're showing, even the big supermarkets, they're showing them what you want them to stock, aren't you, by buying these things. So yeah, I can see that by buying Traidcraft you're showing that.⁵⁷

The emphasis, for Sarah, is not so much on the aggregate consequences of purchasing decisions, but rather the sense that fair trade consumption is an avenue for expressing one's commitments, of having them registered by powerful actors in the public realm.

Another Fairtrader, Hattie, provided a more sustained justification of fair trade consumption. This centered on fair trade consumption as a medium for establishing and maintaining a sense of agency amongst ordinary people:

The thing that you have to break through is the ‘It’s such a big problem, what can I do about it’. Yeah, OK, if a government can do something about it then that’s great, if the international financial facility happens and aid doubles then that would be wonderful, but people feel that they can’t individually do anything. Whereas in fact fair trade is something you can do individually.⁵⁸

The difference that fair trade can make from Hattie’s perspective, her reason for being involved, does not lie in individualized acts at all. It lies in being involved in a practice that demonstrates a sense of empowerment through concerted action:

Because if everyone thinks they can’t make a difference then they don’t, but if each person just changes one or two things that they buy, and it just begins to build, and it is something that you can do and it is something one person can do, that a group of people in a village or a town can make a difference to.⁵⁹

For Hattie, it is this possibility of ‘making a difference’ which the success of fair trade in the market demonstrates:

And it does add up. I think it’s that thing of ‘Yes, individual action can actually make a difference and add in’, and that’s really important in lots of ways, because that’s where people feel disempowered and disassociated from politics with a capital ‘P’ and think ‘what I do doesn’t make any difference’ or ‘what I say nobody listens to’. And the more people see that it does, the better.⁶⁰

This ordinary understanding amongst both Fairtraders and their customers is indicative of an appreciation of markets as certain kinds of public space, in which values

can be expressed, the existence of certain constituencies made visible, and positive capacities affirmed. It also indicates a clear sense of realism about the position of fair trade as one part of a broader movement focused on trade justice, labor solidarity, and human rights:

Fair trade per se is tiny, it's grown a lot recently, it's still miniscule compared to world trade as a whole, but I think its very important to have standards set, saying yes you can trade ethically. You're waving the flag, which has much wider influence on other organizations, and there's things like the Ethical Trading Initiative which affects the big boys, and I think that's very driven by the existence of full-on fair trade. I think that it's an ethical driver.⁶¹

John's sense of fair trade as an 'ethical driver', as enacting a kind of demonstration effect, throws light upon the problematic of mainstreaming that recurs throughout discussions of fair trade and ethical consumerism. As we suggested in Sections 1 and 2, the narrowly economic understanding of fair trade tends to off-set the virtue of fair trade's origins in niche markets to the hazards of expanding into mainstream retailing. For fair trade activists though, mainstreaming is not necessarily seen as a problem in this way at all. Pauline, a fair trade customer who is active in the Trade Justice Movement and Christian Aid, actually goes out of her way to buy fair trade products in supermarkets:

If it's available in a supermarket, I would rather buy from the supermarket. I would rather buy from the supermarket because that, because they look through all their sales don't they, keep all that data, and if they can see that people, that there's people buying the fair trade stuff or

Traidcraft stuff, they're gonna stock more of it, so where possible I would buy from the supermarket.⁶²

This view is quite consistent with the primary objective of generating benefits for producer communities through increasing the market for fair trade. But Pauline also expresses an understanding that the growth of fair trade in mainstream retailing is a further boon to raising public awareness of trade justice issues. And this view is consistent with Traidcraft's increasing involvement in advocacy and lobbying:

I mean, the contacts that we have now with movers and influencers have grown alongside a growth in fair trade more generally and our customers. The more mainstream it becomes, the more opportunities are created for people at our Policy Unit to talk to people and to change opinions.⁶³

Not only does mainstreaming provide opportunities for further awareness raising, but it also shows a level of support amongst 'consumers' whom Traidcraft can claim to represent. When engaging in policy arenas with government officials, regulators, and business, this capacity to speak authoritatively for 'The Consumer' carries important persuasive force – sales figures for Traidcraft plc and donation figures for Traidcraft Exchange are important devices in enabling this representative work.⁶⁴ This strategic use of sales figures in lobbying and campaigning points up one of the most interesting facets of fair trade consumption as a 'surface of mobilization': while a great deal of fair trade consumption is not motivated by the sovereign acts of rationalizing consumers, these acts of purchasing are counted and reported by organizations as if they were reflections of

consumer preferences. Being able to speak in the name of ‘the consumer’ is, for these organizations, a crucial means of representing the popular will in engagements with business, regulators, and governments.

For our research subjects, buying or selling fair trade seemed a natural extension into the everyday routines of social reproduction of the commitments they already sustained in other civic, community, and political practices. Our research subjects expressed a range of understandings of whether and how their fair trade activities counted as ‘political’ or not. Sarah, whose involvement in fair trade is only as a customer, sees this as “Just doing my little bit I suppose. It’s that ‘think global act local’ I suppose, that sort of thing”.⁶⁵ Likewise, Liz, another Traidcraft customer, does not involve herself in public campaigns with which Traidcraft is associated such as Make Poverty History “because I felt I supported it in other ways, through supporting fair trade”.⁶⁶ But she acknowledges the facilitating role of Fairtraders and Key Contacts in enabling her to be part of these networks:

They make it possible, yes. Because I’m not the sort of person, I admire all these young people who usually are, who go out and do things and go out and help in a crisis. I don’t think I would ever have been, I’m not the sort of person, I wouldn’t feel brave enough to do it myself, I would rather help in other ways.⁶⁷

Liz sees her activity not as ‘political’ but as ‘practical’ instead.

Liz is one of the customers in North Somerset supplied by Debbie, one of Bristol’s Key Contacts. Debbie does recognize her activity as a kind of political action:

Yes I do, but I mean in the actual taking action, going out on the streets and going to rallies, that type of thing, and meetings as to what are we going to do, how are we going to approach this campaign, I don't go to the campaign meetings and I don't go out on the demos [...]. I mean I'd love to, I'd love to but I don't have time. So on the practical side I feel I'm there to provide the stock, provide myself if that's required, and provide information if they want it, or I can point them in the direction to go.⁶⁸

Debbie describes herself as “a networker” and a “frustrated activist”. Her own reason for not engaging in more formal campaigning is because she invests so much time enrolling people into fair trade distribution. Debbie ‘sets out her stall’ in all sorts of mundane spaces: churches, village fetes, youth clubs, schools, Women’s Institute meetings. This type of practical advocacy ensures that fair trade goods and literature can be made present in these sorts of spaces and on these sorts of occasions: she is an agent for the low-level diffusion of fair trade products and discourses into local social networks.

Beyond those for whom their main involvement in local fair trade networks is as a customer-supporter, and those like Debbie who actively work to sustain and extend these networks of fair trade supporters, one finds people in these local networks for whom fair trade consumption is just one part of a much more explicitly political self-identity. John combines purchasing fair trade products with other ethical consumption practices: he boycotts Esso, buys organic food, and invests with the ethical bank, Triodos. He is also an active fair trade campaigner at work, persuading colleagues to switch to fair trade coffee; a member of the Labor Party and Friends of the Earth; and has been actively involved in advocacy work with the Ecumenical Council on Corporate Social

Responsibility and the British Wind Energy Association. For him, fair trade purchasing follows from these commitments:

Well I suppose, on one level, you say, I have a very personal obligation so I buy fair trade and that's like discharging some sort of personal obligation or commitment, and then you say, wearing the political hat, and writing letters to MPs or chief executives, you're attempting to influence the wider, have an impact on a much wider scale, and I suppose I'm quite motivated to do that.⁶⁹

While fair trade fits with John's other political commitments, he does not see it as a political act *per se*:

I mean obviously it would be hypocritical if you didn't do those things yourself, um, but in a way I think one letter that hits home and leads to some small shift in a big organization has a much bigger impact than my own personal consumption of coffee.⁷⁰

This range of personal and public activities is typical of the participants in fair trade networks in and around Bristol. Jenny runs a Traidcraft stall at her church and another stall at the local farmers market in North Bristol: "We're actually out in the street and this is what we wanted to do, to try to get it beyond the church doors".⁷¹ But this is just an extension of other commitments, including her active involvement in trade justice campaigns through her involvement with Christian Aid:

“Well I get the information from Christian Aid. You know, there’s sort of an ongoing campaign of sending postcards and such like. And I get the postcards for church, pass on the information, set up displays and such like. And an awful lot of that is to do with trade justice because, as you know, an awful lot of charities are involved with that”.⁷²

Similarly, Pauline is the representative for Christian Aid at her own church, which is, as she puts it, “all tied up with Trade Justice, and fair trade, Drop the Debt, that sort of stuff”.⁷³ She sees herself as a campaigner rather than an activist. She has attended protest marches at the G8 summit in Genoa in 2000, the Labor Party conference in Brighton in 2004, and the G8 summit near Edinburgh in 2005.

John, Jenny, and Pauline are all involved in a variety of forms of individualized activism, of which their fair trade consumption is just one aspect. But it is important to recognize that, for each of them, these fair trade activities sit alongside forms of contact and collective activism such as writing letters and sending postcards, or going on marches. Furthermore, fair trade is, for them, a supplement to other involvements in trade justice and global poverty campaigns. It serves as a way of extending and performing these public commitments into their everyday lives.

The ‘career’ of Edna, one of Traidcraft’s Key Contacts in Bristol, literally embodies these different forms of activism and their articulation with different organized modes of public action. Edna has worked with Traidcraft for 25 years, starting with a personal commitment that quickly spread into her church network:

I started buying coffee just for myself, and fairly quickly became more and more convinced that this was the right thing to do and that other people ought to do it too, and started talking to people in church. And we started buying it as a group, and then it just gradually grew from there.⁷⁴

Edna soon became a Key Contact for her area of Bristol, helping other Fairtraders with their stocks and events, and more generally encouraging and advising Fairtraders. But she is increasingly involved with moving fair trade ‘out of the church’. This partly involves “weaning certain people off buying their Café Direct from me, when I want them to buy it in the supermarkets”. She is also sensitive to the danger that fair trade is seen by some churchgoers as a form of paternalistic charity given to passive recipients in the Third World. Moving out of the church therefore also involves foregrounding the political dimensions of fair trade, and she has become increasingly involved in campaigning, having become actively involved in the Bristol Trade Justice Group, and in Christian Aid campaigns aimed at G8 meetings in Genoa and Edinburgh. She now sees herself primarily as a campaigner rather than just a Fairtrader, reflecting her own gradual realization that, on its own, buying and selling fair trade products is not “going to change the world”: “The world is actually going to have to change by political will”.⁷⁵ Edna’s progression – from Fairtrader in church, to Traidcraft Key Contact, to campaigner and activist – epitomizes the organizational diversification of Traidcraft across different functions (trading, charity, lobbying, and advocacy) and different social and institutional networks. Edna embodies a series of different roles – customer, seller, activist – that are articulated together in deployment of fair trade consumption as one aspect of the broader fair trade movement.

In this section, we have used the reflexive understandings of Fairtraders themselves to further displace ‘the consumer’ from the centre of analytical attention when seeking to understand the dynamics of fair trade consumption. From their own perspective, taking part in fair trade consumption provides committed Fairtraders and fair trade customer-supporters, who occupy positions of relative privilege by virtue of their location in advanced industrial economies in the global North, with a means of engaging in shared projects which avoid the paternalism popularly associated with charitable appeals and international aid: “it’s a working partnership with other people to try and improve the conditions of those people who really are struggling”.⁷⁶ Thus, displacing ‘the consumer’ helps to bring into focus the ways in which the fair trade movement seeks to problematize everyday consumption as a scene for the development of novel forms of global political responsibility in an unequal world.⁷⁷

5. CONCLUSION: RELOCATING AGENCY

We have argued that fair trade practices in the UK can be analyzed with reference to the forms of civic participation and collective action that they help to articulate. Rather than conceptualizing fair trade through the lens of consumer demand, we have focused on its political rationalities, using the case study of Traidcraft as a way of elaborating on the relationship between organizational strategy and social networking through which fair trade consumption works. Traidcraft is not simply a trading company operating in the marketplace; it is a network of volunteers embedded in a variety of social networks; and it operates as a trading company, charitable fundraiser, and lobbying and advocacy

organization, either in its own right or by pooling its resources into networks, coalitions, and campaigns. The prevalent economic framing of fair trade, in business and management studies as well as in critical social science, reproduces a picture of the world whose key agents are producers and consumers acting through the market. The case study of Traidcraft networks indicates that agency needs to be located not in the activities of consumers, but in the articulation of intermediary organizations, social networks, and everyday practices of social reproduction. The political rationality of fair trade organizations does not imagine the subjects of fair trade consumption as individualistic, rational consumers. Traidcraft thinks of its activities in one sphere as supplementing and supporting those in other spheres: it seeks to enroll supporters not as consumers located at one end of commodity chains, but as members of social networks that extend into all sorts of ordinary, everyday spaces. Likewise, Fairtraders and fair trade customer-supporters think of their own fair trade activism as drawing on and extending their own social networks, and they understand fair trade to sit alongside other commitments and energies they already practice.

In both its organizational complexity and in the practices of Fairtraders and their customer-supporters, fair trade consumption combines aspects of individualistic, contact, and collective activism that cross divides between private life and public sphere, the ethical and the political. Understood in this way, the growth of fair trade consumption in the UK carries important theoretical lessons for accounts of civic and political participation, suggesting that these activities can take place in all sorts of mundane locations (at coffee mornings, in school assemblies, at church stalls) at the same time as belonging to spatially and temporally extended networks of advocacy, campaigning, and

mobilization. The key axis of social differentiation around which fair trade consumption is organized is not simply income level, but a more complex assemblage of professional expertise, associational life, and social capital in which the key actors are institutions such as churches and schools and trade unions, and in which people participate not as abstracted consumers but as Christians, or socialists, or teachers, or friends. The fair trade movement mobilizes existing social networks and articulates novel combinations of production, distribution, and consumption, with the purpose of sustaining a vision of alternative economic and political possibilities.

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Figure 1: Traidcraft GeoActivist Personality Test

1. Do you and/or your family buy fair trade products?
2. Do you believe actions speak louder than words?
3. Are you keen on meeting like-minded individuals?
4. Are you interested in getting or staying fit?
5. Do you enjoy walking, running, cycling?
6. Have you traveled off the beaten path?
7. Would you like to get more involved in fighting global poverty?

If you answered yes to questions 1 and 7, and yes to one or more of questions 2 through 6, then congratulations – you fit the profile of a Traidcraft GeoActivist!

Source: <<http://www.traidcraftinteractive.org.uk/news.php?story=46>> (accessed August 2006)

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- ⁷⁴ Interview with Traidcraft Fairtrader (Edna), April 2005.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid.
- ⁷⁶ Interview with Traidcraft customer and activist (Erika), July 2005.
- ⁷⁷ D Massey, "Space, time and political responsibility in the midst of global inequality", *Erdkunde* 60 (2006): 89-95; I Young, "Responsibility and global labour justice", *Journal of Political Philosophy* 12 (2003): 365-388.