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Global Responsibility at Work: Sweatshop connections and beyond

Chapter for *Hommage a Francoise Messant-Laurent*

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Introduction

Responsibility at work, whether it be the responsibility exercised by corporations towards their workforce in a period of economic restructuring or towards consumers over the ethics of their trading, is an issue few enterprises can afford to dismiss in an era of global brands. The ability of firms and enterprises to act responsibly in the marketplace is a complex issue, as the work of Francois Messant-Laurent has had cause to remind us (Messant-Laurent, 2002). In this chapter, I want to add another dimension to the debate over enterprises and the responsibilities demanded of them by setting the issue in a *global* context, where geography and distance are no barrier to corporations taking responsibility for their actions towards others. Nothing, on this view, is too distant or remote to be beyond a corporation's responsibility, whether that be the loss of employment carried by global outsourcing or the exploitation of a factory workforce overseas. Nothing, it would seem, is too far away to care about.

This is the position arrived at by the political theorist, Iris Young, after reflecting on the nature of the US and European antisweatshop movement's claims and it forms the central focus of my concerns here (Young, 2003; 2004). What is intriguing about her stance on 'responsibility at work' is that she considers all those *connected* to an economic system which allows sweatshops to persist across the globe to be in some way responsible for the intolerable working conditions suffered elsewhere. On this view, responsibility thus includes consumers as much as retailers, corporations as well as contractors, indeed all those tied into a global system from which they benefit economically. What is especially novel about this is that it is a model of global responsibility based not so much on the demand to care for distant others because they suffer oppression and economic injury, but rather because we are all part of a much bigger global process which actually reproduces those exploitative working conditions. As consumers, we may not be the cause of others suffering exploitation elsewhere, in far off places, but we are seen to be connected to them through our purchases in the marketplace.

In what follows, I first set out the reasoning behind Young's social connections model of responsibility. At its core, as I have indicated, is the assumption that because western consumers benefit from economic exploitation overseas they thus have an obligation to take responsibility for distant working lives. Notwithstanding such claims, I then go on to argue that such obligations of justice to distant others can, paradoxically, obscure exploitation closer to home. In the absence of visible market connections to low paid, often insecure workers closeby, such as office cleaners, security guards and agricultural labour, no obligation is readily apparent. Some things, it would appear, are perhaps too close to see or too difficult to care about. Finally, I explore this paradox further by looking at the ways in which moral responsibilities are registered politically by social movements, and why some potential global justice claims fail to become 'public' in any organisational sense.

Responsibility for elsewhere

Iris Young developed her social connections model of responsibility in an attempt to think through the contemporary nature of obligations of justice that arise from a world characterised by heightened global interdependence. In a world where economic and political events tie people together across borders, our actions increasingly assume and depend upon others elsewhere to perform certain roles. A global division of labour, for Young, produces obligations to those who condition and enable our actions, as indeed they do to us, no matter how remote or unfamiliar they may be. In today's world, what is striking about her conception of justice and responsibility is that she is suggesting that people should take responsibility for things that they, directly, did *not* cause.

Exploitation in overseas sweatshops is the case that Young reflects upon to underpin her argument. Consumers in the affluent markets of the developed world, she points out, do not set out to exploit workers in far-off locations when they purchase cheap clothing or sportswear made in less developed parts of China and East Asia. They merely buy and wear the clothes; they do not hire and fire or threaten the workers on the factory floor. Yet the purchase of the clothes at low cost is enabled precisely by the tasks performed by

others elsewhere, who bear the costs of exploitation. As she sees it, the ties that bind consumers to the harm done in overseas sweatshops make us responsible, *but not to blame*, for what happens on the factory floor. There is no need to feel guilty every time we pull on a Gap T-shirt or a Nike vest, but because we benefit from the sweatshop connection in the form of cheap clothing we are obliged to do something about the pressures that such a demand transmits to factory managers on the shop floor.

On this logic, as consumers we benefit from a system that reproduces exploitation elsewhere and as such we bear some responsibility to do something about those conditions. If our need for cheap clothing is dependent upon sweatshop labour, the workers' demand for a decent job is dependent upon our ability to bring pressure to bear upon the big corporate retailers to do something about it. The dependency, it is pointed out, cuts both ways (see also Hartwick 2000; Johns and Vural, 2004). The obligation, in this instance, is not one to care about workers on the far side of the globe simply because they suffer oppression and injury, but rather to take responsibility for being part of an interdependent economic system which allows such working conditions to flourish. Our role, as consumers, in this system is merely to go about our normal business of buying the clothes at what we regard as a reasonable price, yet these innocuous actions set up a chain of consequences that lead, through the contractual supply system, to workers on the factory floor being prevented from earning a living wage. Consumers, contractors and factory managers alike are caught up in a system which leaves the latter group no margin to improve factory pay and conditions. Because consumers, broadly speaking, set the price at which they are willing to purchase goods, their actions presuppose and depend upon others elsewhere to make them at a cost which fails to deliver a living wage (Oxfam, 2004; Clean Clothes Campaign, 2006).

The stress upon our responsibility for others elsewhere arising through everyday, *normal* practices of buying and selling is a key part of Young's argument. Most consumers, when they shop for this or that item, expect the goods to be available and on sale at an affordable price; the retailers take it upon themselves to stock the goods and expect companies further down the chain to procure them from wherever, and so on, until

we reach the overseas factory manager and the workforce on the shop floor who expect, but rarely get, a living wage. There is nothing unusual about this set of market connections, much of it is conventional business practice, yet those on the factory floor suffer. In that respect, it is precisely 'business as usual', Young argues, that obliges consumers to take responsibility for the harm and injustice that their actions indirectly bring about.

If it were simply a case of a rogue factory manager or a dishonest contractor's dealings which lay behind such wrongs, then punishing those to blame would restore the balance and the problem would go away. But managers and contractors alike are both caught up in a global economic system which leaves them no margin to improve factory pay and conditions. The situation is not exceptional and therefore there is no one to blame or punish. Nor, for that matter, are consumers or retailers to blame, but rather because they have a role in a much larger set of ordinary economic transactions they perpetuate a series of inequalities for which they are, in some way, responsible. On this view, their collective actions contribute, often in some negligible way, to sweatshop conditions abroad.

For Young, the collective nature of such actions is precisely what makes the ensuing responsibility *political* as opposed to legal. In this, she follows Hannah Arendt (1987) who drew a sharp line between political (collective) responsibility and legal (personal) guilt, on the grounds that the former arose from actions taken together and from which we cannot absolve ourselves. On this account, shared responsibility for sweatshops arises from the fact that together, consumers, retailers, buyers, contractors, and factory owners, produce the unedifying spectacle of exploitation which enables clothing to be produced at lower prices than is possible in the affluent West. Whereas guilt singles out individual blame, our innocence as consumers makes us collectively responsible for the things we have not done. It is, as she sees it, the price we pay for the fact that we live our lives with others, in an interdependent world, and from which we cannot walk away or voluntarily dissolve.

It follows, then, that everyone has a share of the responsibility, including the exploited workers themselves (so they are not helpless ‘victims’), because it is our collective actions – innocent or otherwise – which gave rise to sweatshops in the first place. But, as Young is quick to point out, that does not mean to say that all responsibilities are of the same order or magnitude. Some actors such as factory owners and government institutions are more caught up in the system, some such as the big multinational retailers are more powerful than others, and some are more capable of bringing about change at arm’s length. Certain groups, like consumers, have a spending power at their disposal which can be used to exert pressure on those who can effect change at close hand – the corporate retailers, government bodies, and the like. On this view, whereas sweatshop factory owners and managers may be culpable, distant consumers and other agencies are held politically responsible for bringing about change in our everyday buying and selling practices that reproduce exploitation elsewhere.

As a model of global responsibility directed at the harm done to distant others, it has enabled social movements, such as the anti-sweatshop movement, to demonstrate a greater awareness of our entangled lifestyles and life chances. Rather than random sets of events taking place in different parts of the globe, the unequal nature of their global interdependence points to the fact that some groups benefit at the expense of others elsewhere. The fact of connection on a global scale makes us all responsible, so long as the ties persist or remain visible (Klein, 2000). In so far as markets are not something we can choose to opt out from, the scope of one’s responsibilities thus extend to the far corners of the globe.

Young’s social connections model of responsibility at work is, in this regard, path breaking in its account of geographical responsibility. It cuts across simplistic notions that some issues of social and economic justice are just too distant and too complex to be able to do anything about. Moreover, it foregrounds the significance of political responsibility as a collective, not an individual act, which, following Arendt, draws attention to the interdependence of our conduct in a world that is enabling of one another’s actions. But if the fact of connection is a geographical *strength* of this model of responsibility, it is also

one of its *weaknesses*. For such a model can, almost inadvertently, obscure economic harms and injustices where systemic connections appear absent or are rather less obvious to discern. Of which, some wrongs, paradoxically, may turn out to be much closer to home.

Responsibilities closer to home

Global connections, it is often forgotten, are not given, they are made. For Young, the development of a social connections model of responsibility enables her to link peoples' everyday actions to issues of global social justice. The obligations of justice that she has in mind relate to a common humanity which transcends nation state and ethnic boundaries, and are explicitly transnational or global (Young, 2004). A responsibility for those distant in time and space who suffer exploitation at our expense, albeit unknowingly on our part, forms the backdrop to her argument. Oddly, though, this backdrop assumes implicitly that exploitation, on the one side, and benefit, on the other, are separated by the gulf of distance. The two may be connected, but large swathes of the globe keep them apart. A concern for global justice in this instance translates as one that involves responsibility for the far-off, the remote poor and exploited. What, then, of injustices at a workplace 'closer to home'? In particular, the economic harm done to workers in close proximity for whom no connections are traceable?

Perhaps the most obvious group of workers who frequently fail to register as an exploited presence in our midst are contract office cleaners. Largely unacknowledged by those who work full time in offices, the cleaning workforce of a multinational firm or bank in any major city like London or Zurich may be just as global as the companies which contract their labour. In London, migrant workers from Columbia, Portugal, Nigeria and Eastern Europe clean the offices of the big financial firms in the City, yet their presence or their low pay rarely registers for those who consume their services (see Allen and Pryke, 1994). No connection is drawn between the working lives of cleaners and the benefit drawn by those who expect, but rarely acknowledge, their workspace to be tidy, clean, and free from any obvious dirt.

In part, this is because contract cleaners, whether day or night staff, remain largely out of sight from the main office workforce. As a group, cleaners predominately work before and after the main employment period of the day, and where they cover the daytime shift they often occupy different parts of the building from ‘core staff’, taking their breaks separately, usually at different times. Indeed, the presence, if that is the right word here, of those who clean offices is only really apparent when things are not clean or have been left uncleaned. Interestingly, it is the presence of dirt and dust which reveals more about those who toil under an impoverished set of employment conditions in terms of pay, job security and fringe benefits, such as sick pay and holiday entitlements.

In Young’s terms, the market for contract cleaners should be no different from sweatshop labour contracted to stitch and sew clothing for western retailers. There is an economic connection, but it is one that is rarely drawn, in part perhaps because we do not ‘wear’ cleaning services as we do the clothes on our back. But while the product may be less tangible, it is not hidden. Clean, well kept offices are the expected norm and few office employees expect it to happen without labour involved. It is just that no obligation of justice is drawn, no benefit at the expense of the cleaning workforce is acknowledged. Why this should be the case is not immediately obvious, although sometimes the things that are right in front of us, in close proximity, are among the most difficult things to see (Ree, 2000). In this instance, it may be that the very proximity of an impoverished workforce makes it all the harder to acknowledge any responsibility for the obvious inequities. Indeed, the very fact of distance evident in the obligation felt to overseas sweatshop labour may, paradoxically, make it possible to accept responsibility for their plight. In Georg Simmel’s terms, the pressure of dealing with the ‘close by’ can be more intense than those dissipated by ‘distance’ (see Allen, 2000).

The same point can be directed at the exploitative working conditions of migrant agricultural labour working in the fields and processing plants outside of the major cities to supply the urban population with fresh produce through the supermarket chains. In the UK, but with parallels across a number of European countries, the creation of a new, temporary ‘guest labour’ workforce, much of it from Easter Europe, has taken place over

the past decade with little or no comment. Only recently, has the exploitative working conditions experienced by those working on farms and the secondary processing plants – where the fruit and vegetables are packaged and processed – been brought to light (Association of Labour Providers, 2006; Trade Union Congress, 2005). As well as instances of bonded labour and the employment of child labour, evidence of forced overtime, intimidation, concealed subcontracting, and illegal deductions from pay, as well as unpaid wages, were documented as part of the ‘normal’ business of agricultural gang labour and their working lives.

Such abuse and breach of employment regulations, however, is not a distant feature of some offshore factory, but a daily occurrence among the casual labour who work in the UKs food and farming industry (Lawrence, 2004). Moreover, many of those working in this sector are engaged in the picking, packaging and processing of foods for the major UK supermarkets with outlets close by. In common with the plight of those caught up in overseas sweatshop exploitation, the west’s desire to enjoy cheap labour ‘on its doorstep’ comes with a series of responsibilities to those who provide it. But, in this instance, the connection between exploitation and consumer benefit is not registered. We eat the foods provided by migrant casual labour in the same way that we wear the clothes made by sweatshop labour, yet the connection, and hence the obligation, is rarely drawn.

In contrast to office cleaning, the economic connection between producer and consumer is certainly more transparent, in particular through the bags of pre-washed salads and ready-made meals chilled for our convenience set out on the supermarket shelves, yet the presence of this casual workforce remains equally unacknowledged (Sims, 2007). Again, this impoverished workforce is neither hidden nor ‘invisible’; on the contrary, it labours in close proximity to the retail outlets that sell their wares. As before, it would appear that some things are too close to see, or perhaps in this instance the supermarkets themselves opt to ‘distance’ themselves from a workforce that would reflect poorly on them – should a connection to them be too tightly drawn. Avoiding responsibilities can be as keenly sought as they are demanded by others.

That said, facing up to responsibilities closer to home, especially where the global traces of migrant labour are in evidence, is no doubt something that Young would endorse. The absence of connection in the case of contract cleaners or casual agricultural labour, both of whom experience harm and injustice at our expense, does raise however the question as to how connections are made and established over time? The shared, political responsibilities that Young and, before her, Arendt, pinpoint perhaps highlight what is at issue.

Political mobilisation and responsibility

Earlier, I spoke about the tracking of responsibilities through the connection to others as both a geographical strength and a weakness of Young's model. In foregrounding our responsibilities to distant others as part of a concern with *global* justice, however, the ever present danger is that injustices more *local* in character will fail to register. Local, though, as the migrant character of both cleaning and agricultural labour in the UK testifies, already has the global folded into its rich texture. Yet this in itself has not produced a demand that we take responsibility for more proximate forms of labour exploitation. This, I would argue, is down to the fact that the social connections model of responsibility is more a *political* than an economic exercise. Which connections are actually put in place by campaigning groups and social movements, in that respect, is dependent upon such groups being able to mobilize a 'public' around them (see Barnett, 2003).

What is interesting about the antisweatshop movement campaign is that they attempted to set 'wrongs' right by persuading (others might say manipulating) a variety of dispersed consumers that their connection to exploitation overseas not only carried responsibilities, but that they actually had the power to make a difference. And a key part of that mobilization was the ability to *draw closer* politically events distant in time and place to an audience on the far side of the globe (see Allen, 2006). They did this by glossing over the complex subcontract relationships between retailers and producers and establishing an *immediate* connection between what was going on 'over there' in China

and East Asia, with corporate decision makers taken ‘back home’. In response, initially at least, the big corporate retailers attempted to *distance* themselves from any responsibility for events elsewhere by pointing to the sheer complexity of the economic connections involved. Indeed, their first reaction was to deny the connection on the grounds that they owned no factories in Asia, but rather operated through contracted suppliers. Their response, as much as the initial connection was political, in so far as it involved tracking or denying connections brought about through assumed greater global interdependence.

The demands for consumers to take responsibility for the plight of overseas workers, or for corporations to take responsibility for the working conditions of their suppliers, or for firms to take responsibility for outsourcing jobs abroad, are all, in that sense, political demands. In the absence of political mobilisation, no issue of workplace justice or employment harm is likely to register as a ‘public’ issue, whether they are down the road from us or on the far side of the globe. That is the real power of the social connections model of responsibility at work: it represents a political means by which ‘publics’ are made present by *starting* all connections from the same point of origin – ‘us’ in the affluent economies.

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