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## 'Change today, choose Fairtrade': Fairtrade Fortnight and the citizen-consumer

### Journal Item

How to cite:

Wheeler, Kathryn (2012). 'Change today, choose Fairtrade': Fairtrade Fortnight and the citizen-consumer. *Cultural Studies*, 26(4) pp. 492–515.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:  
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/09502386.2011.622780>

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## **‘‘Change Today, Choose Fairtrade’’: Fairtrade Fortnight and The Citizen-consumer**

*Abstract:* The Fairtrade consumer is widely represented as an individual who intentionally and reflexively consumes Fairtrade goods in order to register their support for the plight of producers in the developing world. This figure is imagined to ‘vote’ with her/his pocket every time they visit the supermarket thus demonstrating their commitment to the Fairtrade trading model. However, this image of the Fairtrade citizen-consumer does not emerge automatically as a response to the increasing availability of Fairtrade goods in the market-place but has to be made by various intermediary actors and organisations. This paper examines how the Fairtrade consumer was constructed and called to action by the Fairtrade Fortnight promotional campaign that occurred within the UK in 2008 and was co-ordinated by the Fairtrade Foundation. This annual event offers a unique window into the processes and actors involved in the mobilisation of the Fairtrade citizen-consumer. Through a close focus on the promotional material distributed to different audiences and the events that occurred during this fortnight, this paper reveals the contingent and shifting nature of the citizen-consumer identity. In so doing, it highlights how varying degrees of reflexivity and action are demanded of different audiences and how this shapes the way that Fairtrade goods are qualified and distributed in the market.

*Keywords:* Citizen-consumers, Consumer Movements, Fairtrade consumption, Globalisation, Mobilisation, Reflexivity.

There has been a striking increase in the consumption of Fairtrade goods across the world, with global sales figures tripling in value between 2004 and 2007 (Krier, 2007). The Fairtrade model

presents itself as a simple solution to the problems of poverty created by unfair trading relations. The concerned shopper is told that by just choosing a different type of coffee or chocolate, which may or may not be more expensive than their regular brand, they can help to make a difference to the lives of families in the developing world who will now receive a ‘fair’ price for their produce. The global chain between the producer and the consumer is shortened as the active choice of a consumer in one corner of the world is connected to the improved livelihood of a producer in the other corner. Existing accounts of the ‘Fairtrade consumer’ by the Fairtrade movement, policy makers and academics tend to assume that the decision to purchase a Fairtrade product is the conscious choice of an individual ‘citizen-consumer’ who wants to register their support for producers in the developing world or, more politically, to ‘vote’ for fairer trade through their consumption.

Like any consumer brand, awareness of the availability and meanings of Fairtrade products amongst the general population relies upon a set of market devices such as promotional campaigns, point of sale displays and information and educational policies. Within the UK, one of the largest markets for Fairtrade sales (*ibid.*), the Fairtrade Foundation (FTF) is the key institution responsible for the promotion of Fairtrade goods and the expansion of the Fairtrade market. The FTF coordinates a number of promotional strategies, including the growing ‘Fairtrade Towns’ movement,<sup>1</sup> and the important event that will be the focus of this paper, ‘Fairtrade Fortnight’. Fairtrade Fortnight has been running since 1995, usually during the first two weeks of March, and involves a range of organisations and intermediary actors – NGOs, businesses and retailers, the media, local activists, the government and producers – who come together to promote the Fairtrade movement, increasing the visibility of Fairtrade and the ‘Fairtrade consumer’ in the public realm. In 2008, the Fairtrade Fortnight campaign called upon UK consumers to ‘Change Today, Choose Fairtrade’ and aimed to demonstrate to consumers that “through their daily choices, their actions can have a significant impact to benefit producers’ lives in developing countries” (FTF, 2008g: 6). At the same time as consumers were told they

ought to be actively choosing Fairtrade options, Sainsbury’s and the Co-op announced their intention to switch their own-brand tea to Fairtrade, Tate and Lyle announced that its retail sugar would now be Fairtrade, Virgin trains ran on-board promotions to highlight that all of their hot drinks were Fairtrade (and had been since 2006), and 28 communities announced their achievement of Fairtrade Town status, highlighting the availability of Fairtrade drinks in at least 28 more council offices across the UK. Fairtrade Fortnight is often marked by high profile ‘Fairtrade switches’ in which retailers, businesses and public organisations move entire product lines, or change their procurement policies, to Fairtrade. These switches, as well as the range of campaigning events that occur during Fairtrade Fortnight, can be seen as powerful market devices that shape how Fairtrade goods are perceived and qualified by different actors.

A ‘market device’ has been defined as the “material and discursive assemblages that intervene in the construction of markets” (Muniesa et al, 2007: 2) and it is important to recognise that a whole host of actors come together to embed and entangle consumers within market exchanges. Whilst much attention has focused upon the reflexive citizen-consumer who actively seeks out and buys Fairtrade products because of their commitment to the Fairtrade movement, much less attention has been paid to how this citizen-consumer has been constructed and enabled by a set of socio-technical devices and knowledge systems, nor have the implications of these tactics on the reflexivity of Fairtrade consumer acts been explored. This paper uses the 2008 Fairtrade Fortnight campaign in order to show how the ‘Fairtrade consumer’ was constructed and mobilised as a citizen-consumer, with specific attention paid to the range of actors and organisations involved in this process. In particular, it pays attention to the institutionalisation of collective Fairtrade purchasing and asks how this choice-editing has been made possible through an evolving and complex set of interactions. By focusing on the promotional material distributed by the FTF to local campaigners and the commercial sector, and some of the key media and social events that marked this Fortnight, the paper highlights the contingent and shifting nature of the citizen-consumer identity. In so doing, it is able to

demonstrate how varying degrees of reflexivity and action are demanded of different audiences and how this shapes the way that Fairtrade goods are qualified and distributed in the market.

The paper begins by considering the growing interest in the citizen-consumer in recent years – which has occurred not just in the sphere of Fairtrade consumption but across a number of policy areas and consumer concerns, for example in debates about recycling and the marketization of public services. It then moves on to an examination of this figure through its exploration of the Fairtrade Fortnight case study. The 2008 campaign was chosen because the author conducted focus groups and ethnographic research in Chelmsford Fairtrade town<sup>2</sup> during this period (with both Fairtrade supporters and non-Fairtrade supporters) and the discussion of the national campaign can therefore benefit from these local insights.

### **The rise of the citizen-consumer**

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in addressing the citizen-consumer – a figure who, powered with the right information, is able to regulate market relations and public services through the exercise of individual choice. Increasing attention has focused upon this figure since the 1980s, when the neo-liberal policies of the Thatcherite Conservative government in the UK and transatlantic New Right privatised public services. This socio-political moment provided the context in which the ‘consumer’ became an important political figure who was “drawn into the limelight of public debate” and was appealed to by a number of different powerful actors and organisations (Kjærnes et al, 2007: 95). At the same time as governmental organisations were directing their attention towards the choosy consumer, so too were non-governmental and charitable organisations calling upon consumers to support their various social and political interests. Of course it is not a new phenomenon that interest groups have used the ‘consumer’ as a key figure in the promotion of their aims. Historians have shown how the consumer has been constructed as a powerful figure in a number of campaigns throughout modern history, for example, in the challenge against the use of slave-grown sugar in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Sussman,

2000); in the fight for a Co-operative trading system since the 18<sup>th</sup> Century (Gurney, 1996); and in the protection of individuals’ basic rights in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Cohen, 2003; Hilton, 2003). In each of these campaigns, the authors illustrate how coalitions of interest groups came together to construct an image of the ‘consumer’ which they could then mobilise to raise awareness of their cause and recruit supporters. As Trentmann has pointed out:

“consumers did not rise effortlessly as an automatic response to the spread of markets but had to be made. And this process of making occurred through mobilization in civil society and the state as well as in the commercial domain, under conditions of deprivation, war and constraint as well as affluence and choice, and articulated through traditions of political ideas and ethics” (Trentmann, 2006: 6).

In this way, the differences between the figure of the citizen-consumer in contemporary society and her/his earlier incarnations are the specific social, political, economic and cultural contexts in which s/he is called to action.

It has become commonplace for accounts of Fairtrade consumption to make allusion to the figure of the citizen-consumer (Bennett, 2004; Goodman, 2004; Lamb, 2008; Lyon, 2006; Micheletti, 2003; Murray & Raynolds, 2007; Scammell, 2000). Whilst popular representations of consumption tend to be opposed to forms of civic participation and citizenship, Fairtrade consumption supposedly challenges this understanding because consumers are using their consumption ‘choices’ in order to support producers in the developing world and send a message to transnational companies and governments of their desire for political change. Existing research has tended to draw on the work of Giddens (1991;1994) and Beck (1992; 1994) in order to argue that the growing interest in Fairtrade has been driven by the conditions of a late modern or risk society. It is in this climate that an increasingly reflexive self emerges who is constantly monitoring and reforming their practices in light of incoming information and has “no choice but to choose how to be and how to act” (Giddens, 1994: 75). Daily life decisions, such as consuming goods, take on political significance as individuals use the emerging global reflexive space to engage in a form of “self-directed life-politics” which draws on the “ability to

self-actualize while constructing a morally justifiable form of life in the context of global interdependence’’ (Lyon, 2006: 456). Although the ‘reflexivity thesis’ has been widely employed in explanations of Fairtrade consumption, it has been challenged because of its failure to interrogate whether all individuals are equally free and motivated to act on information about global trade inequalities regardless of their material, cultural and affective circumstances (Adams and Raisborough, 2008). Indeed, its portrayal of consumption acts as expressive and active neglects the ordinary and routine nature of much of our consumption behaviour which has less to do with conscious choice and more to do with the collective norms and practices, infrastructures of provision and institutional frameworks that people operate within (see Shove, 2003; Southerton et al, 2004; Warde, 2005; Wheeler, forthcoming).

Whilst it may be the case that not all individuals who consume Fairtrade necessarily understand their actions as a form of citizenship, the citizen-consumer remains an important figure through which to publically represent Fairtrade and to recruit supporters (Barnett et al, 2008; Clarke et al, 2007a). Following Trentmann (2006) and Miller and Rose (1997), the Fairtrade citizen-consumer ought to be understood as an active achievement of various knowledge systems and intermediary actors who have used ‘‘productive’’ techniques in order to mobilise and ‘make-up’ the ‘consumer’. Consumption and citizenship are imagined to hold *new* and *powerful* associations in the late modern/global society because various commercial, civic, academic and political institutions have mobilised the Fairtrade consumer in this way. This is similar to the conclusion reached by Clarke et al in their analysis on ethical consumption guides who argue that the representation of various types of ethical consumption as forms of political engagement is ‘‘a contingent achievement of strategically motivated actors with specific objectives in the public realm’’ (Clarke et al, 2007a: 231).

For Clarke et al, there are two key strategies through which organisations, like the Ethical Consumer Research Association (ECRA) or the FTF, mobilise and publically represent the ‘ethical consumer’. Firstly, they provide a ‘‘self-selecting’’ audience – that is those individuals or

groups who are already likely to sympathise with and support certain causes - with practical and narrative resources to enable them to extend their existing commitments into “certain dimensions of their everyday consumption” and motivate them to recruit “new supporters from within their own social networks” (ibid: 237). Echoing academic accounts of the rise of life politics and the diminishing role of the nation state, the common narrative storyline provided by these organisations revolves around the suggestion that individuals in a globalised world, now uniquely have the power to use their role as consumers to ‘vote’ for fairer trading conditions. In reality, this recurring discourse oversimplifies the relationship between national governments and multinational corporations (see Jensen, 2006), and the relationship between consumer choice and the policies of multinational corporations. Nevertheless, as Clarke et al show, this selective representation of the processes of globalisation and the resultant forms of consumer empowerment constitute the rhetoric through which the self-selected ethical (or citizen) consumer is called to action. Indeed, it could be argued that these representations generate “resources of hope” that enable *some* individuals to think through the “extended cultural impact” of their own and others’ actions and provide them with opportunities to address this (Littler, 2009: 5).

The second way that consumer organisations mobilise and construct the ethical consumer is through the careful representation of the collective acts of consumers (gathered through market research and surveys) which are then used by these organisations in order to speak on behalf of ‘consumers’ in policy arenas and the wider public realm. Organisations like Traidcraft, Oxfam, the FTF and Christian Aid are engaged in advocacy work with governments and corporations and this work relies on them being able to show they have “broad-based popular support for the sorts of changes they are promoting”, such as unfair trading rules and cancelling Third World Debt (Clarke et al, 2007: 241). By collecting survey data detailing the potential size of the ethical consumer market and representing this as indicative of individuals’ active consumption choices (rather than the consequence of changes in systems of collective



provision), these organisations can establish ‘‘the legitimacy of their own claims and the validity of their own arguments’’ (ibid). In this way, Clarke et al suggest that ‘‘it is acts, not identities or beliefs, which matter in mobilising the presence of ‘ethical consumers’ in the public realm’’ (ibid). If we apply this to Fairtrade consumption, it seems that what is important is to show that Fairtrade products are being bought, which can then be represented as indicative of the active choices of thousands of consumers who support efforts to challenge fairer trading rules.

What has not been considered thus far in existing literature is how a range of actors (not just consumer organisations) come together to construct and mobilise the citizen-consumer and how their various actions shape the marketplace, enabling the occurrence of multiple acts of Fairtrade consumption amongst the UK population. Callon describes the market as a dynamic process in which ‘‘calculative agencies compete and/or co-operate with one another... [so that] each agency is able to integrate the already framed calculations of the other agencies into its own calculations’’ (Callon, 1998: 32). The interplay between different actors and organisations, that may have different and even competing objectives, is important to explore if we are to understand how the characteristics of Fairtrade goods are qualified and how Fairtrade products are exchanged in the market. One thing is certain, the consumer is not alone when choosing between products but is supported by a range of market professionals and devices, as well as informed and guided by peers and social networks. The image of the citizen-consumer is a complex construct that is constantly being (re)configured in the face of changing circumstances that these diverse actors have had a collective hand in establishing. Fairtrade Fortnight provides a unique window to observe this multi-actor process and it is to this promotional campaign that this paper now turns.

### **Campaigning for change: Fairtrade Fortnight events**

In 2008, for the first time Fairtrade Fortnight was launched at a public event on the South Bank in London (FTF, 2008a). More than 8,000 people attended the Fairtrade Fairground, opened by

George Alagaih (the then patron of the FTF) which offered ‘all the fun of the fair’ with a Fairtrade twist. There were Fairtrade-themed rides and games (Fairtrade tea cup rides, Fairtrade snakes and ladders, a Fairtrade coconut shy), opportunities for people to have their fortune read with Fairtrade tea leaves, actors were dressed as Fairtrade bananas, and there were presentations from Fairtrade producers who told of how they had benefitted from selling their produce as Fairtrade. With lots of Fairtrade companies (like Cafédirect, Divine, Liberation and Fairhills) offering free samples of their goods to Fairground goers, the event represented a fusion of traditional expositional marketing techniques (e.g. the trade show with sampling) with social and cultural activities for the whole family. There was a desire to bring Fairtrade into the everyday lives of consumers and to encourage loyalty to the Fairtrade movement.<sup>3</sup> Over 12,000 campaign events were held during this Fairtrade Fortnight and, unlike the launch event which was led by the FTF, most of these events were organised by committed local Fairtrade supporters. Fairtrade supporters often join Fairtrade networks, such as Fairtrade Towns, schools, universities, churches and workplaces, where they can socialise with like-minded individuals at the same time as helping to promote the Fairtrade movement. Indeed, I attended several Fairtrade Town steering group meetings over the course of 2008 in Chelmsford and Fairtrade Fortnight was *the* event in the groups’ calendar. The FTF makes campaign resources available to these interested individuals/groups in order to help them organise events in their town/institution. This material offers a unique insight into both who is most likely to be involved in the promotion and active consumption of Fairtrade goods and how the FTF mobilises these individuals/groups as active citizen-consumers.

The FTF provides local campaigners with ‘Action Guides’ to give them ideas about the types of events that could be carried out over Fairtrade Fortnight and how to use these events to gain support from local businesses and media. The types of events suggested reflect the objectives of the Fairground event – to provide social and cultural activities under the banner of support for Fairtrade, both in the market and as a movement. Interestingly, these action guides

are targeted at different sorts of campaigners/sympathizers with a general action guide (FTF 2008b), a Church action guide (FTF 2008c), and a Synagogue action guide (FTF 2008a). The general action guide states that all the events could be carried out by individuals, town groups, schools or workplaces but it is clear that the majority of events presume that the type of person likely to be involved in organising an event is someone who is already interested in Fairtrade and probably already connected to some form of local Fairtrade network. For example, campaigners are encouraged to hold Fairtrade Fashion shows, pub quizzes, sports days and cooking competitions, all of which would require a base of supporters to organise them. We can see how the guides target a ‘self-selected’ audience who have existing sympathies and commitments towards Fairtrade which are strengthened and sustained by the information and resources provided by campaigns like Fairtrade Fortnight.

In the Church and Synagogue guides, information is provided about running events in these places of worship with prayers and religious readings relevant to the Christian and Jewish faith, and supporters are told that buying and promoting Fairtrade is a way of ‘‘putting faith into action’’ in everyday ways (FTF, 2008d: 16). This connection of Fairtrade with the everyday expression of an individual’s faith offers the opportunity for religious sensibilities to be extended through involvement with Fairtrade. The provision of separate guides for faith-based networks suggests that the FTF is aware that a large proportion of its supporters can be found in these locations. For example, within Chelmsford, the coalition that forms the Fairtrade town group has a number of representatives from faith groups, as well as from the Trades Union Council and the Co-operative movement. And indeed, the FTF acknowledges the important role of leading Christian organisations like Christian Aid, CAFOD and Traidcraft in establishing the FTF stating that ‘‘church groups have, for years, been one of the strongest support groups in the UK’’ (ibid.). Whilst there is a desire to utilise these faith-based networks to ‘‘spread the word’’ (FTF, 2008e: 11) about Fairtrade in a quasi-religious message, there is also a desire to move away from the association of Fairtrade with religious affiliation in order to enable the mainstreaming

of Fairtrade beyond this niche (Malpass et al, 2007a). This will be particularly evident when we come to examine how the FTF communicated its objectives to their commercial partners.

Fairtrade Fortnight is at least in part organised *for* the Fairtrade supporters as well as to ensure the continuing profile of the movement. It offers the chance for Fairtrade supporters to enjoy themselves (despite the organisation clearly involved) and to feel part of a bigger movement at the same time as reinforcing their commitment to Fairtrade within their social networks. Through these events, the Fairtrade citizen-consumer is mobilised as a vibrant and growing community of like-minded individuals who together are motivated to challenge unfair trading rules and promote the movement. However, the attendance at the range of events organised over this period tends to reflect the intended audience of the action guides provided by the FTF. If individuals are not already involved in these social networks, it is unlikely that they will be aware that they are occurring in their local community or that they would be interested to go. Of course there will be variations in the size and scale of local events throughout the UK, but when the author conducted research with thirty non-Fairtrade supporters living within Chelmsford during Fairtrade Fortnight 2008 she found that not one of these individuals knew that it was Fairtrade Fortnight or was aware of any events in their town (see Wheeler, forthcoming).

### **Fairtrade in the mainstream**

Although Fairtrade Fortnight is marked by a number of local Fairtrade events which tend to be found in particular locations and appeal to a ‘self-selected’ audience, the FTF is also eager to use Fairtrade Fortnight to encourage its commercial partners to make greater commitments to Fairtrade. The FTF is aware that there is a need to remove the association of Fairtrade with its activist niche if it is to ‘tip the balance’ of trade towards Fairtrade (see FTF, 2008f). The desire to move Fairtrade into the mainstream can be seen most clearly in the ‘Commercial Briefing

Document’ (FTF, 2008g) which provides an insight into the Fairtrade Fortnight strategy as presented to the Foundation’s commercial partners. In this document, the FTF states that:

“we aim to target anyone that eats, drinks, wears clothes and shops. So this means everyone! From our schools campaign to educate young children about trade issues and encourage them to raise awareness with parents, to workplaces challenging employees to begin sourcing Fairtrade catering options at work, to working with supermarkets to target shoppers of all ages with point of purchase campaigns, we aim to reach as many people as possible.” (ibid.: 4)

Through highlighting their campaigning work in schools, workplaces and supermarkets – which are relatively ‘universal’ institutions – commercial partners are encouraged to pay attention to Fairtrade because of its potential appeal to all of their customer-base, not just those found in relatively niche social networks. However, as we have seen by looking at the intended audience of the Fairtrade Fortnight campaign resources and action guides, the FTF is aware that the typical Fairtrade consumer/supporter is not just ‘anyone’. Yet they frequently call upon the all-inclusive category of the ‘consumer’ stressing the non-exclusivity of Fairtrade because it both provides the impetus for campaigners to continue to encourage more people to become Fairtrade consumers and support the FTF’s work, and enables companies to demonstrate their corporate social responsibility (CSR) credentials at the same time as tapping into new ethical markets.

Mainstream commercial retailers did use Fairtrade Fortnight as an opportunity to promote Fairtrade and to increase sales of these goods. Most of the major supermarket-retailers offered promotional discounts, or extra points for the purchase of Fairtrade goods. Supermarket chains, Co-op and Sainsbury’s, used the period to announce that all of their own-brand teas would now be Fairtrade. Similarly, the sugar manufacturers, Tate and Lyle, announced their intention to switch all of their retail sugar to Fairtrade. Virgin Trains ran Fairtrade promotions on board and the coffee-retail chain ‘EAT’ switched to Fairtrade coffee in store. Recent work has questioned the ways in which corporations have utilised ethical consumer claims to promote their public reputations as responsible businesses (Littler, 2009; 2011; Miller, 2007). Operating under the

banner of social responsibility – or “enlightened self-interest” (Miller, 2007: 48) – corporations are able to generate new markets and heighten brand recognition by appealing to both consumers’ and company workers’ desires not to be implicated in harmful businesses practices. However, a key concern has been whether these claims are used to highlight corporations’ practices of voluntary self-regulation thereby removing the need for mandatory government legislation. Whilst it is possible to understand CSR as a smokescreen, Littler (2009) calls for an understanding of CSR as a system which is not only ‘done to us’ but something we participate in creating through our actions as consumers and workers.

Indeed, without the actions of committed citizen-consumers who for years demanded Fairtrade products, and without the capacity of the FTF to coordinate the production and distribution of Fairtrade goods to a standard acceptable to the supermarkets, the mainstream retailers would not been in a position to be able to transform their systems of provision, thus editing the choices available to the end consumer. Callon et al (2002) have argued that market professionals (and interest groups like the FTF) seek to destabilise consumers from their established routines and encourage them to re-evaluate the qualities of goods, in the hope that these consumers will change their routines in favour of the new or previously unnoticed goods. Cochoy (2007) suggests that Fairtrade offers one such window for this requalification process and highlights how supermarkets use material devices (such as point of sale displays and cleverly designed packaging) to guide us towards the ‘right’ choice. . By reducing the price of Fairtrade goods, highlighting the production processes behind Fairtrade by using photos of producers (discussed below) and removing the choice of non-Fairtrade options, some consumers may indeed stop and think about the politics of the products they consume and be motivated to act in accordance with the Fairtrade citizen-consumer identity. However, it cannot be overlooked that some individuals will not be destabilised from their routines and yet will be consuming Fairtrade because of the changes to systems of collective provision. By considering the techniques employed by the mainstream retailers, it becomes possible to imagine that the Fairtrade

consumer could be just ‘anyone’ because by using particular stores or brands people are “inculcated knowingly or not, willingly or not” into the consumption of Fairtrade items (Malpass et al, 2007a: 642). The wider Fairtrade movement – for example, Fairtrade Towns (28 new towns achieved this status during the Fortnight), Workplaces, Schools and Churches – works through a similar mechanism by campaigning to change the procurement policies of organisations and local businesses to Fairtrade. By shifting the systems of collective provision, individuals will become Fairtrade consumers just by doing their weekly shop or by drinking a cup of coffee at a work meeting, but they do not necessarily become knowledgeable about or supportive of the aims of the Fairtrade movement. We are reminded of what Clarke et al said about the need to create “acts not identities” when mobilising and representing ethical consumers in the public realm.

### **The possibilities and limitations of the Fairtrade citizen-consumer**

With increasing sales during Fairtrade Fortnight, it is possible for the FTF to demonstrate to the government that they represent the public voice in the wider debate around trade justice. Whilst the citizen-consumer is generally imagined to eschew the traditional political process for a more direct action in the marketplace, closer inspection reveals how Fairtrade Fortnight creates the opportunity for engagement in more traditional political campaigning activities amongst its committed supporters. In partnership with Traidcraft (a Fairtrade company founded on Christian Values), the FTF launched a trade justice action card which could be sent to Gordon Brown (the then prime minister) to ask him to use his influence in G20 meetings to make all trade fair through structural interventions. These postcards could be ordered through the FTF and Traidcraft websites which means that they were most likely to be used by active Fairtrade supporters who wanted to move beyond merely buying Fairtrade goods to supporting action at the governmental level. Recent research has highlighted that being a Fairtrade supporter is about much more than just consuming Fairtrade goods and involves a whole range of actions, some of

which can be seen as more traditional forms of political campaigning like lobbying one’s MP (see Wheeler, forthcoming). So for some audiences, Fairtrade Fortnight will be about switching their coffee to Fairtrade whilst for others it will be about extending their engagement with the movement. One can imagine that this deeper engagement is likely to be influenced by the existing situation within one’s town or school so that if Fairtrade goods are already widely available, the citizen-consumer will be supported in new ways to promote the movement. The citizen-consumer is thus a shifting category that need not be confined to ‘voting’ with his/her pocket but can be called to action in different ways at different times depending upon his/her commitments.

7,000 postcards were sent to Downing Street and during Fairtrade Fortnight Gordon Brown pledged his support for Fairtrade during Prime Minister’s Question Time (FTF, 2008a: 12). In addition, 87 MPs signed an Early Day Motion (EDM) which praised the FTF for their work to date, offered support for the FTF to introduce a Fairtrade Schools scheme, acknowledged that Fairtrade is “an established way for developing communities to trade their way out of poverty”, and called for the government to fund proposals for the expansion of Fairtrade (UK Parliament, 2008). Importantly, the Department for International Development (DFID) announced during Fairtrade Fortnight that it would be giving the Fairtrade Labelling Organisation £1.2 million<sup>4</sup> in order to help the movement expand over the next two years. The then International Development secretary, Douglas Alexander, explained the decision by saying:

“UK consumers and businesses recognise the benefits of buying products from developing countries – both in terms of quality and as a simple and effective way of supporting the poorest people on this earth” (DFID, 2008).

Although this economic and public support from politicians was no doubt a welcome contribution to the Fairtrade movement’s efforts, given the breakdown of the Doha trade talks later that year, we can see that there are limits to what the market and citizen-consumers alone can achieve. More “concerted action by states and global institutions, pushed by organised civil society, is needed to re-regulate trade and economic activity” (Jaffee, 2007: 35). The important



point for this paper, however, is how the government’s endorsement of the Fairtrade model during Fairtrade Fortnight shaped the public image of Fairtrade consumer goods and helped to sustain the legitimacy of the FTF to speak/act on behalf of the citizen-consumer.

### **Defending the Fairtrade consumer**

Many of the achievements of, and announcements made by, the various organisations and actors during Fairtrade Fortnight were picked up by the national and regional press – revealing how this campaign worked to make the ‘Fairtrade consumer’ a newsworthy figure. The FTF claimed that they received 5,309 Fairtrade ‘media hits’ during Fairtrade Fortnight; 71.6 per cent of which came from regional press, and 99.5 per cent of which was positive (FTF, 2008a: 20). Fairtrade farmers appeared on the GMTV breakfast show, the cooking show ‘Ready Steady Cook’ on BBC2, and on the BBC News (*ibid.*). In the national printed press, newspaper articles in the Observer (Mathiason, 2008), and Financial Times (Beattie, 2008) covered Tate and Lyle’s switch to Fairtrade and the big funding injection from DFID. The Executive Director of the FTF, Harriet Lamb, released her book over Fairtrade Fortnight charting the difficulties of getting Fairtrade into the mainstream and the positive effects she had witnessed from her work with the FTF, which was reviewed in the Independent on Sunday (Heathcote, 2008). The FTF targeted women’s magazines in particular during Fairtrade Fortnight because International Women’s Day occurred during the two-week campaign and there was a desire to connect the consumption of Fairtrade with the promotion of women’s rights across the globe. Most of the media coverage adopted a positive reading of Fairtrade as something which consumers could easily do to benefit producers’ lives.

However, despite the FTF’s claim that only 0.5 per cent of press coverage was negative, an opportunistically-timed release by the Adam Smith Institute (ASI), *Unfair Trade* (Sidwell, 2008), which questioned the degree to which Fairtrade actually helps producers, did account for a fair share of negative news coverage. Amongst the criticisms of Fairtrade offered, it was suggested

that Fairtrade distorted the market leaving non-Fairtrade farmers worse off, meaning that it was an inefficient way for consumers to help the poor and aid economic development – counter to DFID’s suggestion that Fairtrade could alleviate poverty and aid development. The ASI clearly had its own agenda (to promote free trade) and it used the Fairtrade Fortnight campaign to offer an alternative understanding of ethical trading relations calling upon the ‘ethical consumer’ to use different ethical labels (like the Rainforest Alliance and Utz Certified) which did not interfere in the market. This then forced the FTF to defend their construction of the Fairtrade consumer. In this way, we can see how the two organisations used the “real and discursive figure of the ethical consumer” (Clarke et al, 2007a: 238) to engage in a debate about the efficacy of their models of economic development through trade. It is interesting to look at the way the FTF defends their vision of the consumer:

“Two billion people work extremely hard to earn a living but still earn less than \$2 per day and the FAIRTRADE Mark enables British consumers to choose products that help address this injustice. As no-one is forced to join a fair trade producer organisation, or to buy Fairtrade products, you would think that free market economists like the Adam Smith Institute would be pleased at the way the British public has taken our voluntary label to its heart - and to the supermarket checkout - to the tune of nearly half a billion pounds worth of goods in 2007 alone” (FTF, 2008h).

In their response to the ASI, it was important for the FTF to highlight the voluntary nature of the Fairtrade model and to suggest that the Fairtrade consumer actively and reflexively chooses Fairtrade products. Wilson (2010) argues that as long as Fairtrade remains a voluntary consumer-driven campaign, it is compatible with the free market system. However, the FTF’s careful representation of the Fairtrade consumer conveniently ignores the growing tendency for Fairtrade goods to be distributed through systems of collective provision, which tend to remove the choice of non-Fairtrade options, and makes it far from always being a ‘voluntary label’.

Indeed, research conducted in Chelmsford in 2008 with non-Fairtrade supporters (those not connected to a Fairtrade supporter network), revealed the growing incidence of ‘accidental’ Fairtrade purchasing/consumption when individuals believed they had not bought Fairtrade but

closer inspection of their shopping receipts and routines, proved otherwise (Wheeler, forthcoming). Discussions with these same consumers revealed some critical challenges to the Fairtrade model which are not given voice when the Fairtrade consumer is imagined to voluntarily and consciously choose Fairtrade. This situation can only have become more prevalent with the increasing proliferation of Fairtrade ‘switches’ since 2008. In preparing this paper, the author conducted a search of the online stores of four popular UK retailers (Sainsbury’s, Tesco, Asda and Waitrose) in February 2011 and found that availability of Fairtrade coffee ranged from 15% in Tesco to 38% in Sainsbury’s, and availability of Fairtrade banana’s ranged from 16.6 % in Asda (1 out of 6 options) to 100% in Waitrose and Sainsbury’s.<sup>5</sup> Dairy Milk and KitKat’s switch to Fairtrade and Starbuck’s decision to serve only Fairtrade lattes and cappuccinos in 2009 reflect the growing number of recent big brand switches. In addition, at the time of writing, there are 500 Fairtrade Towns, 120 Fairtrade universities and schools, at least 59 Fairtrade workplaces (including DFID and British Telecom), over 4000 Fairtrade churches and a growing number of Fairtrade schools – all of which, as a condition of their status, must have switched their procurement to Fairtrade. Of course, as has already been demonstrated in this paper, these switches could not have occurred without the support of, and interactions between, a number of different actors across a range of locations which have made these systems of production, distribution, exchange and consumption possible. But the accidental purchases they create cannot all be understood with reference to the preferred or dominant representation of Fairtrade consumption as a reflexive act.

So how was the FTF able to speak so authoritatively against the ASI’s claims that Fairtrade does ‘more harm than good’? It is of course because of the morality at the heart of the Fairtrade campaign; the Fairtrade producer. The FTF called on British consumers to trust that they know what they are talking about because they have “had the privilege of seeing and hearing at first hand the difference that Fairtrade makes to poor communities” (FTF, 2008h). The credibility and effectiveness of the Fairtrade scheme is secured by the authentic and personal accounts

offered by Fairtrade farmers about their lives. The Fairtrade Fortnight campaign works to support this position and seeks to generate trust amongst the consuming public and other institutions through its portrayal of, and connection to, the Fairtrade producer. Uniting all the FTF’s activities, local campaign events, and the support from commercial partners and government was the desire to communicate to consumers the benefits of Fairtrade for the producers and to make them feel good about making the Fairtrade ‘choice’. This was achieved through the careful representation of Fairtrade producers both at their campaign events (which generated positive media coverage) and through a selection of striking images which pictured consumers and producers side-by-side. Because the representations of Fairtrade farmers during Fairtrade Fortnight are used to defend the effectiveness of the Fairtrade scheme, it will be worthwhile considering how they call the Fairtrade consumer to action and how they communicate the importance of Fairtrade to the producer.

### **Representations of the Fairtrade consumer and producer**

The core proposition for the 2008 campaign was to make consumers “feel good by changing their choices and changing people’s lives” (FTF, 2008g: 6). There were several ways in which the FTF ensured that its campaign made “real connections” between the “world of the consumer with the world of the producer” in order to achieve their core proposition (ibid.). Firstly, the FTF arranged for a number of Fairtrade producers to be present at Fairtrade events organised by local town networks providing a first-hand narrative of the impacts of Fairtrade upon their life. Malpass et al have suggested that visits from Fairtrade producers to Fairtrade towns provide an occasion when “local meets global” in which consumers can rethink the global consequences of their local actions (Malpass et al, 2007a: 641-2). These visits reinforce the predictable before/after narratives (that is before Fairtrade life was bad, after Fairtrade life is better) which imbue the majority of Fairtrade marketing. Fairtrade consumers are offered the opportunity to ‘act at a distance’; romantically projected into faraway lands as “empowered actors” who are able

to alleviate the suffering and hardship of the hard-working ‘Other’ by merely using a different brand of coffee (Varul, 2008: 661). Varul suggests that Fairtrade producers are regularly the subjects of ‘romantic commodification’ because they are used to add symbolic value to Fairtrade products justifying their higher price not on the basis of product quality but on the basis of the producer’s “identifiable otherness” (ibid: 668).

For those who do not have access to Fairtrade producer visits, the second way the FTF tried to connect the consumer and producer was through the development of a creative design concept which featured striking images of producers next to the consumers who used their produce. These images were used for point of sale displays in supermarkets, cafes and retail outlets, as promotional posters to announce campaign events, on web banners, on educational leaflets, and on the trade justice postcards to Gordon Brown. In this way, these images united the Fairtrade Fortnight campaign across a diverse set of locations and amongst very different audiences; from the supermarket shopper who may stop to re-evaluate his/her established routines, to the child taught about Fairtrade and its benefits at school.

### **Figure 1**

#### Key

- a: Photo credit naming producer to demonstrate credibility
- b: Body copy which explains benefits to farmers & workers
- c: Consumer enjoying product imagining its origin
- d: Ambiguous reference to picking - is it consumer or producer?
- e: Grower picking product with pride
- f: The FAIRTRADE Mark
- g: ‘Change today, Choose Fairtrade’: Campaign tag line with call to action sign off

(Reproduced by permission of the Fairtrade Foundation, photo of younger boy copyright of Marcus Lyon, photo of Fairtrade farmer copyright of David Boucherie, source FTF, 2008g: 6)

Figure 1 is an example of one of these campaign images which has been annotated by the designers in order to reveal the intention of the creators. The FTF describes the advertising campaign’s focus as:

“putting consumers in the world of the producer, to depict links between them and create a feeling of pride. The producer is proud of his/her work on producing a quality product, whilst the consumer is enjoying the product, thinking about its origins and is feeling proud of choosing Fairtrade” (FTF, 2008i: 5).

The emphasis on pride suggests that the consumer and the producer are engaged in an equal exchange and that they both feel happy to be using/growing Fairtrade products. We are reminded of Kate Soper’s (2008) suggestion that responsible forms of consumption can be a source of alternative hedonism for consumers who experience a “self-interested form of altruism” in knowing that their personal decisions have wider ramifications (ibid: 196).

Adams and Raisborough have highlighted the importance of picturing Fairtrade producers who are “engaged in their work *and enjoying it*” claiming that these representations can make it easier for the consumer to recognise the Fairtrade producer as a member of the ‘deserving poor’ (2008: 1175). They have suggested that these images are likely to have a particular impact upon middle class consumers who feel guilty about their relative affluence and who draw on these representations of deserving yet distant Fairtrade farmers in order to overcome this guilt. Similarly, Varul has suggested that Fairtrade advertisements often evoke feelings of shame or embarrassment because they confront consumers in the Western world with “our collective bad conscience” and expose us to the fact that we are “not yet beyond the colonialist mentality” (Varul, 2008: 673). Although the phrase ‘He picks Fairtrade... do you?’, plays with the ambivalent positions of producer and consumer suggesting that either individual pictured could occupy both roles, there is no doubt who is the producer and who is the consumer. Rather than achieving the recognition of an equal commercial partner, for Varul the portrayal of the producer is in the end in the “position of the servant” because the producer’s situation is always

dependent upon the continued purchasing and compassion of the consumer (ibid: 669). Whilst Littler (2009) suggests this claim overlooks the significance of Fairtrade as a ‘safety blanket’ for producers against the harsher forms of global capitalism, ethnographic work with Fairtrade producers has highlighted that the Fairtrade model is not a panacea for the varying social and economic problems amongst disadvantaged producers (Dolan, 2008; Jaffee, 2007; Lyon, 2006; Scrase, 2011). Problems with the Fairtrade model and accounts of the benefits not reaching the producers are often voiced in the media; for example in the aforementioned ASI report, or more recently in a *Times* article highlighting the plight of Fairtrade tea pickers (Bahra, 2009). In defending against these challenges to the Fairtrade system, positive evidence of the benefits to Fairtrade producers tends to be highlighted by supporters of the Fairtrade movement, especially during Fairtrade Fortnight.

Whilst we may feel a sense of embarrassment, guilt and doubt, the ‘preferred’ reading (Hall, 1980) (as demonstrated by the annotated comments) is supposed to be about ‘making people feel good about their choices’ emphasising the dignity and success of an equal partnership based on the similarity between the consumer and producer. In this way, Fairtrade advertisements and marketing strategies during Fairtrade Fortnight carefully construct and mobilise the Fairtrade consumer as a powerful citizen-consumer whose continued purchasing of Fairtrade goods secures the livelihood of grateful and hardworking Fairtrade producers. It is this message that unites and motivates both the two-week campaign and the wider movement and market interventions. But whether this is enough to defend the Fairtrade system (as in the FTF’s response to the ASI) is another question.

### **The complex face of the Fairtrade citizen-consumer**

Fairtrade Fortnight has provided a unique window into the processes and actors involved in the construction and mobilisation of the reflexive Fairtrade citizen-consumer. Not everyone who engages with the Fairtrade Fortnight campaign does so with the same motivations or levels of

commitment but they together shape, in an evolving and collective process, how Fairtrade consumer goods are qualified and distributed within the market. This paper has highlighted the shifting and contingent nature of the construction of the Fairtrade citizen-consumer and the role of a complex set of interactions between different institutions and individuals in this process. We have seen that the citizen-consumer has many faces depending upon the audience, from compassionate Christian/Oxfam supporter, to supermarket retailer, campaigning activist, caring government department, free-market champion and Western/middle-class supermarket shopper. As collective Fairtrade purchasing has become institutionalised across diverse locations, this multifaceted citizen-consumer has been called to action through market devices and campaigning discourses that have enabled multiple acts of [un]reflexive Fairtrade consumption to occur. I use this concluding section to summarise how Fairtrade Fortnight 2008 worked to establish the credibility and legitimacy of the Fairtrade model through a matrix of interactions, reflecting upon the implications and consequences of the varying degrees of reflexivity and action demanded of different audiences.

The aim of Fairtrade Fortnight is to increase sales of Fairtrade goods and promote awareness of the wider movement. A diverse range of actors – faith groups and community organisations, retailers, distributors, marketing professionals, local and national government, political activists, NGOs, academics, the media, consumers and Fairtrade producers – together achieve this aim. It is the interplay between all these different parties that makes Fairtrade Fortnight such a dynamic event and the Fairtrade citizen-consumer an ever-evolving construct. Of course the dominant image of Fairtrade citizen-consumer is of an individual voluntarily using their consumer power to aid producers in the developing world, but as we have seen this does not fully reflect how the citizen-consumer is mobilised in practice. The campaigning citizen-consumer who lobbies MPs for trade justice need not be confined to just buying Fairtrade and the accidental or occasional Fairtrade purchaser may do so because of limited choice, price or taste preference rather than commitment to development issues. Fairtrade Fortnight can be



about celebrating within your community networks, generating profits from increased Fairtrade sales or sparking a debate about world trade issues. The actions demanded of the Fairtrade citizen-consumer will depend on local context (such as local availability of Fairtrade and awareness of Fairtrade within local networks), but will also be influenced by international systems of distribution and marketing devices. Rather than the citizen-consumer being a static figure who reflexively votes with his/her pocket, s/he is enabled and constrained by systems of provision, institutional frameworks and social and cultural norms which campaigning events like Fairtrade Fortnight and everyday purchasing acts have a hand in creating. Fairtrade is a powerful market device which encourages various agencies and individuals to evaluate the qualities of consumer goods which in turn shapes the availability and positioning of these goods within the world of similar commodities.

In this multi-actor process, the different guises of the citizen-consumer – as reflexive chooser, campaigner, accidental purchaser, etcetera – are variously used to justify and motivate changes to systems of collective provisioning and to promote and defend the Fairtrade model of development. These structural changes are carried out in the name of aiding the Fairtrade producer – a figure who features prominently in the Fairtrade Fortnight campaign but who rarely speaks without the help of an intermediary that is supportive of the Fairtrade movement. The multiple acts of Fairtrade consumption that are created and counted as a result of these changes can be used by the FTF to promote their model of development in the public realm, as Clarke et al have argued, but they can also be used to justify the continued availability of Fairtrade within mainstream retail outlets because of a professed demand. That does not mean to say that all those who purchase Fairtrade do so voluntarily or consciously because of their support for the Fairtrade system, or indeed that these acts lead to the promised benefits for Fairtrade producers. Littler has argued that ethical or ‘radical’ consumption should not be celebrated uncritically as a progressive and positive force for social change, but neither should it be devalued or dismissed without recognising its political potential. This paper has shown how the Fairtrade movement

can offer *some* consumers, retailers and organisations the opportunity to act as citizens both within the market and as political campaigners to improve the livelihoods of *some* producers in the developing world. However, at the same time, as it offers pathways for some into deeper engagement with trade justice issues, it enlists the support of others without them necessarily being aware of it. This is somewhat problematic given the overwhelming attention paid to the reflexivity and awareness that surrounds Fairtrade consumption acts. As various actors come together to qualify Fairtrade as the most effective mechanism for helping disadvantaged producers and the market is shaped accordingly, it is important that the debate does not become closed off and that alternative actions for consumers, producers, corporations and governments are explored. As long as the citizen-consumer remains an ever-evolving construct and a symbol that motivates debate within both the market and the movement, there is hope that this is possible.

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*Acknowledgements:* Special thanks must go to Sean Nixon who both commented upon this draft and, along with Lucinda Platt, supervised the PhD project from which this article is drawn. Thanks also to Jen Bullen and the anonymous reviewers for their comments. This project was funded by an ESRC research training grant.

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing, there are 500 communities within the UK (and 500 communities across the globe) that have pledged their support for Fairtrade and are actively engaged in increasing the awareness and availability of this label amongst their community, often by targeting the procurement policies of local businesses and organisations

<sup>2</sup> Chelmsford is a market town in Essex with a population of 167,000 (Nomis, 2009). It was the first town in Essex to achieve ‘Fairtrade Town’ status in 2005 and the campaign has been led by a coalition of local people from various local groups (TUC, Co-op, Oxfam, local faith groups, Trade Justice, Amnesty International)

<sup>3</sup> The organisation of social and cultural events under the banner of ‘Fairtrade’ operates in a similar vein to the yearly festivals organised by the Co-operative movement in the early 1900s which aimed to create “a new social feeling” and commitment to the store (Gurney, 1996: 69).

<sup>4</sup> Although this represents a large sum for a particular organisation, it is only a small amount in relation to the overall overseas aid budget.

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that the proportion of Fairtrade varies within different supermarkets which perhaps says something about where Fairtrade is most likely to be acceptable. For example, Waitrose and Asda are directed towards quite different consumer demographics suggesting that there may be class inequalities associated with the citizen-consumer identity – a conclusion also reached by Littler (2011)