

# Ethical Consumption: the Case of Fairtrade

## (Or: Being a Consumer and Being Good)<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. Introduction

“Ethical consumption” seems to be a contradiction in terms. Consumption is usually seen as a moral problem. Locally, the promotion of material self interest in consumer cultures appears to threaten family and community cohesion (de Graaf et al. 2002); and globally the demand for ever more products at ever lower prices does not seem to care for its exploitative effects on workers around the world or for its environmental implications (e.g. Bosshart 2006).

It is therefore surprising that an increasing number of affluent consumers is prepared to pay more for environmentally friendly or socially responsible products. The level of ethical consumption is difficult to assess, but although it seems highly unlikely that it will ever become a majority practice, there are indications that it is a growing phenomenon, at least in the academically educated middle classes (Cowe/Williams 2001). According to a report by the Cooperative Bank (2003) in the UK, ethical spending accounted for 6.9 billion pounds – ‘ethical consumerism’ being defined here as ‘personal consumption where a choice of product or service exists which supports a particular ethical issue – be it human

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rights, the environment or animal welfare'. Part of this is, for instance, organic food (£ 920 million), where it is not clear how much of it is spent out of ethical considerations and how much out of health concerns. Another large chunk is accounted for by energy-efficient household appliances (£ 829 million) where long term cost savings may be a more decisive factor than care for the environment. Spending on fairtrade in which the ethical motive seems most unambiguous is estimated by the Fairtrade Labelling Organization (2007) at 2381 million Euros worldwide with a growth rate of 47 per cent on 2006. While growth does not vary too much across the board, volumes are spread unevenly in Europe. In 2005 for instance, the UK's then 206 million Euros retail value of labelled products (equalling 3.46 Euro per capita) compared with Germany's 58 million Euros (0.70 Euro per capita).

Terms like “ethical consumption”, “political consumption”, “anti-consumerism” cover a wide field of practices and there is no authoritative definition for any of them (cf. e.g. Binkley/Littler 2008; Harrison et al. 2005; Micheletti 2003). What they have in common is that consumers use their purchasing power not solely to enhance their personal well-being<sup>2</sup> but at least partly in order to promote a moral or political cause, defying concepts of the consumer as ‘private economic hedonist’ (Sassatelli 2006: 231). Such causes can be very diverse, including boycotts in protest against a country's human rights record or a company's exploitative practices, avoiding produce from larger multinational corporations or any branded goods (Klein 2000), vegetarians and vegans trying to reduce the suffering of animals, or patriots supporting “their” economy by, e.g., “buying American” (Frank 1999).

The case of fairtrade is a particularly interesting one as it does not only try to achieve moral objectives by using market mechanisms but attempts to re-moralise those mechanisms themselves. Under the slogan of ‘in the market against the market’ (Brown 1993: 156) moral consumption here seems to challenge the amorality of the market from within. More than two decades in the running, however, it has become clear that the conflict is not that great after all. The amoral market is quite accommodating toward ethical consumers – it is capable of supplying morality where there is a demand.

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<sup>2</sup> Soper (2007), suggesting the concept of ‘alternative hedonism’, points out that ethical consumption is not wholly ‘altruistic’ but seeks a balance of benefits for oneself and for others.

I will, however, argue that ethical consumerism must be understood not just instrumentally as a means to exert political influence through the power of the purse, but also as a search for authentic self expression, a self-construction as moral person. Through this, character is affirmed within consumerism as a culture of indeterminacy. I will further argue that this is achieved by linking personal character to ethical products by establishing such choices as guided by individual taste. The source of authenticity and morality mobilised in such a search is not, I will conclude, to be found in the postcolonial imageries of fairtrade but in the ethical self's entanglement in the everyday practices of consumer capitalism.

I will use Luhmann's (1990a: 17f.) notion of morality as the communication of respect and disrespect referring not just to particular performances in specific functional contexts but to the person as a whole. Parsons (1951: 129) had made the distinction between approval and esteem, with the former referring to rewarding *specific* performances and the latter to more *general* judgements about a person – and Luhmann's 'moral communication' clearly refers to the latter. The normative currency of a money-mediated market society, however, is not (moral) esteem but (functional) approval since 'there is no symbolic quantification of the objects of approval to compare with money with respect to simplicity and lack of ambiguity' (Parsons 1951: 131). The market is a-moral as money insulates the evaluation of specific performances from the person performing them in a way not achieved by any other means of communication (Simmel 1989). Decoupling specific normative expectations in functionally differentiated contexts from the recognition of the person as a whole facilitates highly complex societies in which irresolvable moral conflicts can be bracketed out as private matters. The task of acknowledging individuals as whole persons in moral communication is shifted to the margins: into the family (Luhmann 1990b: 200) and friendship networks. But the separation of spheres is not absolute: The fact that persons act in different contexts and do not undergo brainwashing when migrating between systems, does not only bring to bear non-economic orientations of those engaged in economic activity – individuals also absorb moral ideas from economic interactions: The accumulation of money as tokens of approval will tend to tip over from quantity into the quality of esteem as in the 'absence of a definitive goal for the system as a whole' economic productivity becomes the most significant field of contribution to the common good (Parsons 1964: 278).

With Veblen (1994) one can argue that such esteem, in order to be socially relevant, must be performed in practices of conspicuous leisure and consumption,

which demonstrate the reward for having complied with social expectations – be they, as Veblen suggested, mere ‘pecuniary prowess’, or productive contribution (Varul 2006). The problem is that the sources of wealth are obscured by the anonymity of money. Specific approvals may be extrapolated into general esteem, but in the process they are put behind the veil of undifferentiated, odourless, general money and hence beyond the possibility of moral communication.

Such a moral vacuum is difficult to accept. The ascend of consumer culture was therefore accompanied by a wide range of attempts to counteract socially corrosive effects of consumerism by channelling free time and money into culturally uplifting and reproductive activities (Cross 1993).

## **2. Ethical Selving through Ethical Consumption**

Sociology, traditionally production-centred, has until recently not paid much attention to this problem. In the age of organised capitalism Parsons and Smelser (1956: 222) still could confidently postulate that consumption was led by normative expectations (‘in accordance with the American value system’) oriented towards reproduction. It was only after the consumerist revolution of the 1980s the sovereignty and hence unmanageability of the consumer-citizen (Gabriel/Lang 2006), was not only grudgingly conceded but enthusiastically affirmed (Abercrombie 1990; Hilton 2001). Consequently the thesis of a de-moralised sphere of consumption as a sphere of unfettered hedonism persists. The rules we follow, according to postmodern consumer studies and lifestyle sociology, are *aesthetic*, not *moral* (e.g. Ziehe 1993). Consumerism as aestheticisation of everyday life (Featherstone 1991: 71ff.) excludes moral motives; any consistency is provided by *taste*.

However plausible this may be, strong arguments have been brought forward for the persistence of moral motives in ordinary consumption. As could be expected – given that family communication is the paradigm of inclusive moral communication – ‘daily provisioning’ for the household still consists in shopping expeditions driven by consideration for the well-being of close others and anxieties around not being “a good mother” (DeVault 1991; Miller 1998). Nevertheless, any such re-moralisation of consumption must be performed against the a-moralising force of money and as the a-morality of consumption remains the default assumption in much of the social sciences (Miller 2001) its moral aspects continue to be overlooked. Ultimately the sphere of consumption is

set up as the realm of freedom – unencumbered self-expression. As Slater (1997: 5) puts it, as consumers

‘we see ourselves as people who choose, who are inescapably “free” and self-managing, who make decisions about who we are or want to be and use purchased goods, services and experiences to carry out these identity projects.’

But as Slater also points out, it is precisely this freedom that throws us into the field of ethics as marked out by Foucault. Because it no longer is seen as just an enactment of role performances but as result of personal decisions, consumption becomes an expression of ‘personal truth and authenticity’ – supported by ‘many of the “authentic values” in which modern consumer goods come wrapped’ (Slater 1997: 16).

What starts out as liberation from conventions and traditions turns into a moral imperative in its own right. If ‘every choice we make is an emblem of our identity’ and thus ‘a message to ourselves and others as to the sort of person we are’, then

‘The self is not merely enabled to choose, but obliged to construe a life in terms of its choices, its powers and its values. Individuals are expected to construe the course of their life as the outcome of such choices, and to account for their lives in terms of the reasons for those choices.’ (Rose 1990: 227)

No longer guided by a fixed set of role expectations this involves an evaluative communication of the whole – authentic – person nonetheless. And as *all* social interaction, even “private”, “casual” social interaction such as in friendship networks, lifestyle communities, leisure activities etc., is structured by normative expectations, there is a strong temptation to revert into moral communication. Shopping itself can be interpreted as an ongoing culture wars between lifestyle groups in which each side document their moral superiority through purchased goods (Douglas 1992). But while there is plenty of moral communication, there no longer appear to be unquestioned moral authorities – we seem to be free to choose on a market for moralities offering values like ‘solidarity’ to individuals who are at the same time free of institutional moral demands and coerced to choose their own morally relevant practice (Bode/Zenker2001: 490f.). All sorts of moral demands can be supplied for – even the counter-cultural rejection of consumer capitalism itself, which, as Heath and Potter (2005) suggest, could be seen as driving consumer culture by forcing it to innovate and differentiate. For those uneasy with aspects of consumer culture, alternative trading organisations open up conduits for ‘consuming differently’ instead of not consuming at all or consuming less overall. Anti-consumption is transformed into anti-consumerist

consumption (Binkley/Littler 2008: 525) within post-Fordist niche markets (Littler 2008: 95ff.), affording a wider repertoire of ethical self-construction and self-expression than mere abstinence would.

The literature on fairtrade has, from the beginning, emphasized moral motives that do not square with consumerist egoism/materialism (e.g. Renard 1999: 496). Non-moral motives for buying ethical were discussed mainly as a matter of concern (e.g. Strong 1997: 35) or even condemnation (Johnston 2002). But once research began to engage directly with fairtrade consumers instead of primarily looking at organisational discourses, a more intricate relationship between a sense of moral obligation and personal self images suggested itself (Shaw/Shiu 2002). Fairtrade activists, Lyon (2006: 456) found, 'situated their interest in fair trade within their lifestyle choices, their sense of self and their vision of the world.' So while it remains largely undetected in the study of mainstream consumption, the link between consumerist self-construction and the ascription of moral responsibility clearly shows itself in ethical consumption.

To characterise this entanglement of morality and self expression, Barnett et al. (2005) have adopted Allahyari's (2000: 4) concept of 'moral selving', defined as 'the work of creating oneself as a more virtuous, and often more spiritual, person'. In keeping with their own governmentality-informed perspective I will speak of "ethical" rather than "moral selving" – with "ethics" denoting practices of freedom and self-construction (Foucault 1987), and "morals" denoting the judgemental aspect, the communication of others' ethical or unethical behaviours and attitudes. The concept of ethical selving underlines both what Barnett et al. found in their study and the results of our own research: the main concern of ethical consumers is to *be* good and not just to *do* good – emphasising ethics as the *teleological* aspect of the relation to the self: 'the kind of being to which we aspire when we behave in a moral way' (Foucault 1991: 355), a teleology that has made a grand reappearance in contemporary neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. The judgemental aspect will then re-enter as soon as the aimed-for or achieved self is communicated to others.

Zadek et al. (1998: 32ff.) had already noted that fairtrade goods could be used by way of conspicuous consumption as 'badge of social belonging' or by way of boosting one's sense of self through the 'feel-good factor' that comes with them. But in the perspective of ethical selving fairtrade goods come to be not only props but outright 'symbols of the self' (Csikszentmihalyi/Rochberg-Halton 1981: 55ff.) or even 'extensions of the self' (Belk 1988) in that they symbolically and materially

incorporate the virtuous character that the ethical consumer aspires to be. Fairtrade goods are not just signifiers that refer to something signified – they are *symbols* in that they both *signify* and *are* “justice”, “fairness”, but also “virtue”: They are the material objectifications of their producers whom the “vignettes” showcased by fairtrade organisations consistently present as living strictly according to a quasi-Protestant work ethic (Diaz Pedregal 2008: 11) – they are industrious, frugal, and committed to their families and communities. Our interviewees, when prompted to describe producers, too, converge on two central characteristics: poverty and hard work.

In this respect the symbolisation of self works by employing what McCracken (1988: 105ff.) calls ‘displaced meaning’ – not only, as Sassatelli (2006: 221) rightly suggests, to represent symbolically a political aim that cannot be fully achieved in reality, but also on the level of character: the inner ethical self, which cannot realise itself to the full, is represented as an objectified ego-ideal in the purchased (and often ingested) goods.

There appears, at a second glance, an inner contradiction between ethical selving as self-construction and ethical selving as self-expression which is inherent in the way the concept of ‘moral selving’ is used by Barnett et al.: On the one hand it is about how subjects make themselves, transform themselves, *create* themselves. On the other hand, the expression of such self as authentic suggests its quasi-natural pre-existence, its being part of an inner self that is, as such, *given* – and can either be expressed adequately or be distorted. In Allahyari’s original concept there already is a tension between ‘creating oneself as more virtuous’ and the ‘experience of an underlying moral self’ (2000: 4). Barnett et al., too, postulate pre-existing ‘ethical dispositions’ (2005: 28). This ambiguity is, I think, not simply a weakness resulting from forcing together Foucauldian ethics of freedom and the Aristotelian essentialism underlying modern virtue ethics (e.g. Nussbaum 1992) – it reflects an “objective” contradiction found in the field of ethical consumption and maybe more widely in contemporary consumer culture. While assembling identities through consumption choices by way of *bricolage* (Lévi-Strauss 1962, Hitzler 1994), they are perceived as guided by personal *taste*, which as naturalisation of culturally acquired skills (Bourdieu 1979: 73) seems to emerge from deep inside the person (1979: 59f.) and hence as immediate expression of that person’s essential identity.<sup>3</sup> Against the background of a social-theoretical

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<sup>3</sup> ... and of course of social position. Barnett, Cafaro et al. therefore are right to point out that a possible problem with virtue ethics is ‘that it can easily lead to a paternalist and censorious judgement of

tradition that by and large sees identity, subjectivity, the self etc. as emerging from processes of social interaction rather than a given entity (e.g. Mead 1935) we can read Foucault's challenge to Sartre's existentialism as a critique of contemporary consumerist quests for authentic selfhood:

'Sartre avoids the idea of the self as something which is given to us, but through the moral notion of authenticity, he turns back to the idea that we have to be ourselves – to be truly our true self. I think that the only acceptable practical consequence of what Sartre has said is to link his theoretical insight to the practice of creativity – and not of authenticity. From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art.' (Foucault 1991: 351)

“Authenticity” thence is post-modernised in that, as Arnould and Price (2000: 146) suggest, the ‘issue is not whether the individual “really” has an authentic experience, but rather whether the individual endows the experience with authenticity.’ This is why, in the eyes of conservative critics like MacIntyre (1981), not only Sartre's existentialist ethics of radical choice, but the whole of contemporary culture is beset with an arbitrary ‘emotivism’. For ethical consumption this throws up the question of how any ethical claim can be made at all – how its moral communication is possible; and also how, if it differs from mainstream expressive consumerism in that it lays claim to moral motives, such morality can result from individual expression rather than from intersubjective normative expectations.

### **3. Ethical Consumers: Expressing or Creating Ethical Selves?**

In order to show how this dilemma is resolved in a convergence of ethics and aesthetics I will draw on material from a recent study on fairtrade consumption in the UK and Germany. We conducted 35 in-depth interviews with fairtrade shoppers in Devon, England, and 22 in Württemberg, Germany and also analysed promotional material from fairtrade organisations and companies in both

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the apparent *vices* of specific groups' (2005: 18). In our own research we found that the reluctance to buy fairtrade often is taken to indicate the moral failings of competing segments of the middle classes (with one interviewee identifying “business men types in their forties and fifties” as the opposite pole). Also, low income is not always accepted as an excuse for not buying fairtrade. Social distinction could not be identified as a central driving force in fairtrade consumption, but the inevitable communication of social position through consumption patterns could be identified as one of the limiting influences on fairtrade growth (Varul 2009).



countries. We interviewed ‘actively’ as proposed by Holstein and Gubrium (1997) so as to maintain a certain level of ‘consumer anxiety’ (Warde 1994; Woodward 2006). The resulting accounts have, on this basis, been interpreted not just as accounts of and for practices beyond the interview situation, but as identity performances in their own right. For the interpretation we applied techniques oriented towards an ‘objective hermeneutics’ (Oevermann 1993)<sup>4</sup>.

I begin with an account of an inner conflict that is paralleled in most other accounts, but normally in a less articulated form. After commenting extensively on the feeling of guilt associated with shopping for fashion and other luxuries this participant asserts:

I could go out feeling bad about all these things and I also need to feel happy; I need to relax. I need to express myself. I want to feel desirable. So I end up thinking... Well, I have a little system in my mind that if I do something that I think is unethical I will try to compensate with something ethical. (Mrs A, academic, early 40s, living with partner, no children)

Here the contradiction between expression and creativity is quite obvious: The inner self is resistant to the sacrifices involved in ethical consumption – the ethical self has to be *built* up against an inner self that is full of consumerist desires, and from a moral point of view appears as not really worth having. The ethical self-to-be-achieved is not something that comes naturally. But the affirmation of hedonistic desires as genuine *needs* implies a dialectics of asceticism and hedonism (Lupton 1996: 143ff.) where the aim is not simply to adopt ethical conduct despite oneself, giving in to external normative expectations. The *telos* is not an ethically pure self. The ethical self-to-be-achieved must still be a sincere *expression* of an authentic inner self. An ethical self that is ascetic in the sense of “self-denying” does not count as self-expression – and after the ‘expressivist turn’ (Taylor 1989: 368) such failure would constitute as great (or greater) a violation as the failure to buy into ethical consumption. So even where there is a story of inner conflict between an ethical character ideal and a reluctant hedonistic actual self and it therefore seems inevitable that ethical selving must be a *creative* act; it is communicated as an *expressive* one. At the same time the (unethical) inner self must

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<sup>4</sup> The process of interpretation cannot be accounted for in this paper – neither can the results be presented in full.

not be caged in. For the sake of authentic expression, testifying to the subject's sincerity, it needs to be co-represented.

The tension between those two objectives contained in the project of ethical selving (creating oneself and being oneself as a virtuous person), is eased by communicating purchasing decisions as led by *taste* which enables the transformation of self-construction into self-expression – taste as being culturally constructed, but constructed as natural. Rather than trying to *do* good against an inner urge not to, fairtrade consumers appear to seek reassurance of *being* good by letting morally right behaviour flow from an ethical preference structure that partly defines them as persons.

We found two ways in which this can be accomplished: Directly through a predilection for ethical products themselves in which the normative and the aesthetical directly coincide in an *ethical taste*; and indirectly in a *taste-for-ethics* where the preference has not the product itself as its object but the practices that lead to its purchase (a taste for scrutinising, debating, campaigning etc.)

### *3.1. Ethical Taste*

The reference point for an ethical taste can be any aspect of the ethical product's 'commodity aesthetics' (Haug 1971). In health consumerism, for instance, it tends to be the gustatory sensation of the edible product (Varul 2004: 336ff.), in fairtrade it is more often the visual appearance.

Commenting on the packaging of *Cafédirect* fairtrade coffee (cf. image 1) Ms A., for instance, engages in a touristic daydream:

I like all their Peruvian mountains and their imagery like that. At least you see it's a place there's no people spoiling the place...

#### **image 1: Cafédirect 5065 instant coffee here**

In the case of Ms A. the ethical taste for the romanticism afforded by fairtrade imagery competes against a taste for refined food and drink – as here when accounting for the temptations of non-fairtrade speciality tea

... I did several times stop at [name of delicatessen shop], which I love and stand in with all the teas and coffees and get really, really tempted and then each time

I have managed at the last minute to walk away, but it was a real struggle. (Mrs A)

As said, the construction and expression of an authentic self is not performed by total self-transformation. One could say that the claim to authentic expression is even strengthened by the fact that it is able to counteract an inertia rooted in hedonistic desires that are equally legitimate parts of the accounted/performed personality.

But that is not to say that such conflict is necessary in ethical taste. The refined taste, connoisseurship, as articulated in an attraction to the delicatessen, already has an affinity to a taste for fairtrade in that, in both cases, provenience is a central criterion for the appreciation of a product (Nicholls 2004: 113f.).

In other cases, there does not seem to be any such conflict at all. For Mr B (teacher in his twenties, living with partner, no children), if there is a conflict, it is more about admitting that the attraction to fairtrade is to large parts based on taste:

there is a kind of aesthetic pleasure and I will admit to the fact that I do buy fairtrade partly because I think it's cool.

Fairtrade for him is an element of his

Guardian-reading alternative lifestyle, you know, you compost and read the Guardian and I buy fairtrade coffee

a lifestyle community in which members

build themselves a bit by what they wear and buy and eat and drink; you know, that kind of foody culture as well

- with the 'foody' culture, in this case, not colliding with the ethical cause but fully coinciding with it. He also talks about the pleasure in buying something that is special as opposed to the standard brands which give less opportunity casting oneself as an individual personality. Fairtrade consumption is explicitly part of an aesthetic project that has been emancipated from its earlier – definitely rather

square<sup>5</sup> – associations with an austere Christian or/and leftwing activism, an aesthetics he locates in a – definitely hipper – “indie” subculture where being different, being an individual in itself is held up as a value. But how is this taste an *ethical* one?

Is this not just an arbitrarily chosen lifestyle element that happens to be considered “ethical” but otherwise devoid of any moral significance? Mr B. does not give a moral account of why what he does is right in terms of a legitimacy of fairtrade. Although he says it is

something I feel quite passionate about and have kind of geared my day-to-day consuming towards it for quite a while

he also says that

I don't know much about it.

In the light of this admission, of course, the claimed passion must refer to *style* of consumption itself rather than its moral *justification*. This does not necessarily mean that such a justification is irrelevant – but it is not seen necessary to be able to account for it. What is more important is that there is a more or less natural attraction to what is right. The *ethical* significance becomes clear when *moral* judgement is passed.

Some friends would say: "Oh well, I don't buy it." And I wouldn't expect them to because it's not their way. Erm, but no, I don't know I would question a friend who does buy it and I feel I should buy it but perhaps another friend I don't think I would. It's.. it depends, I guess, on the... my perception of their identity and whether I think they should or shouldn't.

This is indeed an exceptional case as the requirement of adequate expression of the inner self actually surpasses the assumption that this inner self should of course be one in which the propensity to do right outweighs hedonistic inertia. But the fact that it can be used in a prescriptive moral judgement is evidence that

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<sup>5</sup> Christian activists among our participants were very self-conscious about the detrimental effects of the “churchy” image of fairtrade.

it is, indeed, a case of *ethical* consumption in which the difference between the aesthetical and the ethical disappears.

While in order to illustrate this tendency I have referred to a nearly ideal-typical statement of fairtrade as style of consumption, there clearly is a tendency of aestheticisation in fairtrade marketing (as well as in other forms of ethical consumption) (Wright 2004) – including an aestheticisation of activism itself (Littler 2008: 41), which leads over to

### 3.2. *Taste-for-Ethics*

In this second type of taste it is not the ethical product itself that is an object of appreciation – it is an natural inclination to be interested, to scrutinise the ethical validity of one’s own behaviour, to be politically interested etc. Ms A., for example, reports an involvement in a range of related political activities around development issues which is decidedly individualistic and communicated as expression of personal preference. So while she answers the question “Are you a political person at all?”:

Completely!

but at the same time states to be

naïve about party politics, a bit suspicious but more that  
I don’t really understand it well enough

The political activities are thence communicated as personal properties, characteristics.

... I have my boycotts and my letter writing and my little  
bits of charity.

The individualistic approach matches up with the above cited appreciation for the absence of people on the Cafédirect landscape and a stated distaste for crowds, which shows that the distinction between ethical taste and taste-for-ethics is only an analytical one and the two can be interlinked through a common aesthetical principle (here: distaste for the masses).

The two forms of taste involved also play into each other on the level of marketing as in recent *Divine* chocolate slogans such as “equality treat” which merge the aesthetic desirability of the product – including, in the case of that campaign, the desirability of the producers (Wright 2008) – and try to infuse pleasurability into moral/political concepts like “solidarity” and “justice”.

There are, of course, less ambiguous cases where not only is the ethical taste less pronounced alongside the taste for ethics, but outright rejected. Seeing the ethical purity of fairtrade threatened by an expanding market for “ethical” produce they respond by ‘distinguishing between “real” critical consumers (“activists” and “committed”) and “lifestyle” or “fashion-oriented” consumers ready to jump on the bandwagon of FT.’ (Sassatelli 2006: 226) But while this could be expected to result in countering, to apply Weber’s (1978: 24f.) terminology, affectually oriented by value-rationally oriented practice, I will argue that this rational pursuit of values, too, can be understood as a matter of taste – a taste-for-ethics in which taste does not inform the choice of products but the *way* the right product is identified.

One participant, for example, expressly excludes the possibility of gustatory decision, as

coffee tastes like coffee to me: I can’t really taste any difference, but other people might be able to. (Mrs C., 20s, postgraduate student, no children)

And she clearly draws a line between the right (critical, reflective) way of doing fairtrade and the (unreflected and inconsequential) mainstream off the supermarket shelves:

I think there are people that tend to say: “Oh, I’ll do that because that’s a good thing to do .. erm and it doesn’t necessarily make them think about the other choices of the other things that they are buying. It’s easy to kind of feel good about buying something fairtrade and it doesn’t encourage you to think further about why you are having it.

That the moral judgement passed on (not specified) others should not detract from the fact that even the judgemental elements of discourses around fairtrade consumption tend to be functional in the delineation of *one's own* ethical self rather than in embarking on a moral crusade. They are usually not designed to engage in actual confrontation, or any attempt to change others. Mrs C. for instance states that

I don't try to be particularly evangelical about it.

Rather, such judgements work as contrast to bring out their own approach. In this case, what is challenged is insincerity in fairtrade as displacement of meaning – i.e. the temptation to be satisfied with the symbolic representation of an ethical self and then indulge in feeling smug while not changing much of one's actual shopping behaviour beyond a few flagship items. What is expressed is not just an objection against other people's use of fairtrade produce to buy oneself a good conscience and leave it at that; it is an objection that flows out of an *unease* with such an attitude based on and giving voice to a *distaste* that is also directed against short-comings detected in the respondent's own behaviour – against the temptations of a self-satisfied mindset that threatens to surface up if the propensity to critically scrutinize weakens. It is a distaste that is authenticated, like in Ms A.'s case, in a confession of deficiency:

I'm not an ethical consumer because I still buy plenty of things that I probably shouldn't and I still support loads of things that I probably shouldn't but that's the way I want to be. (Mrs C)

Again, the admission of shortcomings as expression of an authentic self also verifies, of course, the sincerity of the account overall – and as a consequence also authenticates the tendency to question, to enquire, to self-scrutinize as genuine character trait. It is also a confirmation of the importance given to the motivational side, the concern about character in which it is not enough to *do* the right thing but to *do it out of the right motivation*. This does not mean that in a quasi-Kantian take it is only the intention that counts, no matter whether the outcomes actually match those intentions or not. It is better described in terms of a pragmatic approach in which there is a mutual re-enforcement of intentions and results with adverse results feeding back into the formation of habits (Dewey

1922) – the right motivation is seen as more likely to produce morally desirable results and those results indicate the moral viability of character. What counts is the deeply engrained personal disposition that Aristotle (Eth. Nic. 1105b) called *hexis* on which Bourdieu (1979: 193) modelled *habitus* – but cutting off the link to ethics and hence overlooking the role of taste as a *moral* attribute of social distinction.

It may be counter-intuitive to count political preferences and aversions as tastes alongside the aesthetic appreciation of product packaging and lifestyle accessories. There may well be strong rational arguments behind the political convictions voiced – the point is that in the performance of identity that is the interview they are communicated as *preferences*, which – like any sovereign consumer choice – do not need to be further justified. In particular the connections to feelings that have a visceral component like guilt and embarrassment can be seen as functionally equivalent to the distaste viscerally expressing itself through the nausea of the art lover offended by a *kitsch* painting (Bourdieu 1979: 59). From the extensive accounts of how different ethical claims are negotiated (e.g. local sourcing versus fairtrade, justice and development versus “food miles”) and from the effort invested sourcing material for an event as identity relevant as the wedding it is clear that this is not a “chore” – to the contrary, there seems to be pleasure – a ‘warm glow’ (Leclair 2002: 954) – in highly reflective ethical shopping, while the supermarket experience is related to manifest displeasure. In contrast, going to the Oxfam store

you feel that you are doing good by supporting that shop in the first place because you know you are helping the wider charity and that's good. Erm and then within that you are potentially, if you are buying something Fair Trade from that shop, you are potentially doing another good thing as well. And also I guess it makes me feel good on a broader level because if I have made a choice to go there rather than the supermarket

#### **4. In Search of the Ethical Authenticity of the Consumer**

In whatever form, it is central for fairtrade consumers to reassure themselves about the fact that they are not just blindly following a trend but that the choice of fairtrade does express something essential about themselves. That this expression



uses the market as conduit, products as symbols of the self which refer to displaced meanings may suggest that, ultimately, such authentic selfhood is not authentic after all, maybe not even *invented* but *borrowed* – borrowed from Third World producers who, rural and ethnic, represent a lost authenticity unavailable to the First World consumer. The search for authenticity can tap into the aestheticisation of pristine nature and traditional rural life – or into an idealised and distorted (Berlan 2008) image of the producers as moral icons, as noble yet naïve savages. The imageries used in fairtrade marketing do indeed suggest that authenticity lost is to be regained by accessing a supposedly unalienated world of exotic and rural communities in what Bryant and Goodman (2004: 359) call ‘Edenic narratives’.

#### 4.1. *Borrowed Authenticity?*

Fairtrade expresses the dissatisfaction with an anonymised and formally rationalised market. LeVelly (2006: 4) understands fairtrade as an attempt to reintroduce concrete, material rationality of a personalised *oikos* style economy in which there is an imagined personal acquaintance between consumer and producer. Some, therefore, diagnose fairtrade the potential to reverse commodity fetishism (e.g. Hudson/Hudson 2003) by creating a (deceptive) familiarity with “the producer”:

I know it sounds stupid but you know I can feel as though if I was going to go over there and see that person I could say I have seen your picture on the, and I would feel that you know they would be a stranger to me but I would be able to go up to them and say to them you know hello I bought your, I have seen your photo and I have bought you stuff with your photo on it over in England  
(Mrs D, teacher, early 40s, three children)

Others however have pointed out how the way the information flow is organised sets the relation of production up as “spectacle” for Northern consumers’ (Bryant/Goodman 2004: 359) – for consumers, that is, who do not have their own productive activities revealed (Lyon 2006: 458). The authenticity of the producer becomes part of the commodity, symbolic use value. Through partially revealing ‘the social relations behind production, exchange and consumption’ fairtrade advertising ‘(inadvertently?) renders the producers’ lives consumption items.’ (Wright 2004: 666):

‘By inviting me to consume the landscape alongside the coffee, to consume even the people reduced to coffee, the promise is that the authenticity lost in post-industrial society can be reclaimed from the “other” by commodity purchase.’ (Wright 2004: 677)

In a way this can be said to be a case of ‘eating the other’ (hooks 1992) by not only consuming exotic fairtrade produce but, with it, the pictorial and narrative representation of exotic fairtrade producers – performing the double feat of ingesting and distancing them (Johnston 2002) in an act of what Pratt (1992: 7) termed ‘anti-conquest’.

Although fairtrade consumers do not buy into this borrowed authenticity (or if they do so, they do it in a reduced way) such representations still have their effects. I have argued elsewhere that they retract on the recognition agenda of fairtrade (Varul 2008a), and such a retraction can have immediate consequences for how redistribution of power and resources is organised (Wright/Madrid 2007). Also, such idyllising discourses limit the scope of fairtrade as basic agricultural and artisanal goods, and

‘The near complete dominance of handicrafts in the mix of products offered through alternative trade retards the diversification of production that is fundamentally necessary for the economic advancement of developing countries.’ (Leclair 2002: 957)

Thus it requires those who are supposed to benefit to enact the part of the exploited and vulnerable, condemning them to an ethically pure ‘traditional and anti-consumerist way of life’ (Gould 2003: 344)

However, this culinary involvement generally is far less intensive (and indeed far less eroticised) than the imageries of fairtrade marketing suggest. To the contrary, as Diaz Pedregal (2005) points out

‘Hors de l’objet éthique, l’Autre n’existe que peu : les consommateurs éthiques écoutent rarement des musiques « ethniques », ne lisent ou ne voient que très occasionnellement des livres et des films d’auteurs étrangers.’

This matches our own results. We found the actual engagement with “the other” even in their pictorial representation is low. Commodity-racist cross-dressing (McClintock 1995), ‘ethnic chic’ (Dwyer/Jackson 2003) with its exoticising tastes is far less present in consumer accounts than some fairtrade advertising would suggest (to be precise: it is nearly absent). Some of our respondents were very critical when shown mainstream fairtrade promotional images (as used in

Varul 2008a). In general, however, respondents did not have to say much on the topic of connectivity and how producers are imagined – and there was very little evidence of authenticity-borrowing. This of course could significantly reduce the burden on producers to enact expected native/ethnic personae – fairtrade promoters may take note of the fact that their target customers may be less orientalist than the discourse that is served up to them – and shows that the authenticity sought is one of an ethical *consumer* is more about what we are *here* than our post-colonial identifications overseas.

## 5. The Ethics of Authentic Consumerists

If it is not grounded in imported identifications – is there some source of authentic consumer ethics? Baugh (1988: 482ff.) offers a Sartrean take on the question of authenticity that forges together aesthetic and moral judgement in a way that offers a perspective beyond Foucault's emphasis on creativity and MacIntyre's cultural pessimism: an authentic work (in both the artistic and the moral sense) emerges from practical engagement that not just adopts what is but transforms it:

‘A work that arouses our and disgust, if it does so by offending our everyday ends, does not transform our understanding of the world. It is only when the provocation can actually claim our recognition as being in some way a valid way of presenting the world that we will adopt the end of the work's existence and the work will transform our world by organizing it around that end.’ And therefore: ‘Authenticity is not retreat into an imaginary world (a *U-topia*), but a transformation of this one.’

Still: If authentic ethics is one that is transformative – what is the source that drives that transformation which transcends the here and now but is at the same time rooted in precisely this here and now in a way that it can be truly “us”? In order not to decline into what MacIntyre decried as the evils of emotivism, there must be a committing moral framework – and a framework, at that, which is not superimposed using some theoretical system but one that is based on a shared understanding of who we are. Conservative *zeitgeist* critics tend to complain that after Enlightenment and Revolution there is no such framework left. Allegedly, our

‘democratized self which has no necessary social content and no necessary social identity can be anything, can assume any role or take any point of view, because it *is* in and for itself nothing.’ (MacIntyre 1981: 32)

One can lament this as fateful legacy of romantic ‘occasionalism’ (Schmitt 1986: 97) or celebrate it as contemporary consumers’ skill of self-extension through daydreaming (Campbell 1987) with a genuine civilizing potential (Sznajder 2000; Varul 2008b). In any case, in the ‘contemporary culture of authenticity’ (Taylor 1991: 32) the invocation of virtue ethic and reference to the expression of an inner moral self poses the question of how we know what a good character worth expressing is. As Taylor (1991: 43ff.) goes on to argue, even the idea of an ethics of authenticity postulates a shared framework – just like the virtue ethics whose loss MacIntyre mourns requires an unquestioned cultural framework of right and wrong. It is only through this that the paragon of virtue ethics, Aristotle, could describe (to take the virtue particularly relevant for fairtrade:) “justice” (δικαιοσύνη) as a virtue that is to be measured by the outcome it produces. Otherwise all the reconstruction of calculi for arithmetic and geometric justice (Eth Nic 1130b ff.) would not make sense and the definition that justice is what a just person does would suffice. (Eth. Nic. 1105b)

So, in an approach from character in which ‘if it is possible for an individual to represent a potential action as indicative of an admirable or virtuous character then it is likely to be undertaken’ (Campbell 1990: 44f), the question immediately arises: How does one know what is admirable? Even for the ideal-typical romantic consumer as daydreamer, since the imagined possibility of realisation is essential for the consumerist daydream to be pleasurable as the object of longing, there must be social affirmation (and be it only that of an imagined audience). Campbell’s Weberian formula highlights the central shortcoming in Foucauldian approaches: the absence of any notion of legitimacy (Fraser 1993: 17ff.). If the ethical selfer does not only *construct* or *create* her- or himself as good character but also needs to *express* this character there is a necessary element of conspicuousness (Varul 2006) – and such a search for recognition always requires a shared understanding of legitimacy (Honneth 1984). As Foucault (1987: 118) himself emphasises, the ethical self-construction of ‘free men’ serves to create social accountability – and hence cannot be but inter-subjective:

‘*Ethos* implies also a relation with others to the extent that care for self renders one competent to occupy a place in the city, in the community or in interindividual relationships’

In short: ethical selfing without the possibility of moral communication (along the lines of Luhmann’s notion cited above) does not make much sense. Ethical

selving constructs accountability for social interaction that then inevitably will be the object of inter-subjective evaluation.

Above I have already pointed out that research shows that, contrary to the postmodernist speculations of the 1980s and 90s, everyday consumption still *does* operate on moral assumptions. While an explicit legal or traditional normative framework might be absent, the regularities of everyday practice act as a moral background that accounts not only for their intuitively being understood as binding rules, but also for moral innovation, as

‘... the sources of changed behaviour lie in the development of practices themselves. The concept of practice inherently combines a capacity to account for both reproduction and innovation. At any given point in time a practice has a set of established understandings, procedures and objectives. Such formal and informal codifications govern conduct within that practice, though often without much reflection or conscious awareness on the part of the bearers.’ (Warde 2005: 140)

It can be argued that the concept of fairness which is activated in fairtrade is rooted in everyday practices in contemporary market societies. Indeed, one could say that ethical consumers act on ‘a desperate urge to reclaim capitalism, to salvage morality from it’ (Kozinets/Handelman 1998: 478) in that they demand the realisation of the promise of just (meritocratic) distribution – a promise whose universality in capitalist societies (Miller 1999: 61ff.) is countered by its other legitimising narrative – the ‘promise of absolute wealth’ (Deutschmann 2001) – whose realisation for a limited number of people profoundly puts in question any appearance of equitability (Neckel 2001). I have argued elsewhere that this promise of equitability (and recognition) lies in the experience of ordinary practices of capitalist exchange (Varul 2005) – and there are strong indications that fairtrade discourses seek to activate such assumptions (Varul 2008a: 655ff.) which also are the best account for what fairtrade consumers expect to be the redistributive effects of their buying habits (Varul 2009). However different their stories otherwise were, what was shared by *all* our respondents was the intuitive notion of what is violated in the current terms of trade between “North” and “South”: the equitability that (counterfactually) is assumed to be structuring distribution through markets in the North. Very simply, as one participant put it:

... the concept of Fair Trade should be I think to sort of ensure that people doing a job get an appropriate salary

for doing that job I think that's the kind of bottom line of what Fair Trade should be about. (Ms E, public relations officer, early 30s)

The assertion of Michael Baratt Brown (1993: 3) has an instant plausibility that is difficult to refute:

‘One of the unfairest things in the world is the system of trade by which we receive many of the things we enjoy – sugar, chocolate, coffee, nuts, bananas, tobacco – and many of the minerals which go into making the machines and vehicles upon which we rely in our daily lives, from people who receive a bare pittance for their work and enjoy (if that is the word) a standard of living that is a bare twentieth of our own.’

Neo-liberal economists and philosophers arguing against this kind of reasoning openly admit that they are up against common sense intuitions (classically Friedman 1961: 166; Hayek 1972: 62f.). Being rooted in practices rather than in an explicit system of morality this is a case of ‘moral life’ not as a ‘habit of reflective *thought*, but a habit of *affection* and *conduct*’, which ‘we acquire [...] in the same way as we acquire our native language’ (Oakeshott 1962: 61, 62). While not even the official fairtrade discourse spells out a justification of how the current inequitable distribution between Third World producers and First World corporations, supermarkets and consumers is unjust – it is seen as wholly sufficient to describe the terms of trade and the differences in the standard of living – it is immediately clear that they offend the sense of what is just exchange acquired in everyday economic practice.

## 6. Conclusion

Fairtrade, having set out as a small movement that centred very much on ideas about Third World farmers and their living conditions has turned out to also be a consumerist identity project in affluent societies. Ethical products help to create consumer markets for those who do not like to see themselves as mass consumers and those who are concerned about the negative effects that consumerism has on distant others, the environment and themselves. For this clientele it also presents an adequate response to the root dilemma of consumerism as a culture of choice, namely that because the consuming self appears as result of free decisions it is necessarily undetermined, arbitrary. To lay claim to an affinity to fairtrade products which is rooted not only in a value-rational decision but in a character defining taste is a plausible way out of this dilemma. The link between ethics and

aesthetics maintains both the morality and the personal involvement in purchasing decisions. But such personalised ethics nevertheless are not thinkable without a social frame of reference. In activating an implicit norm of equitable exchange lying dormant in everyday capitalist exchanges, fairtrade consumers bring to light a broken promise of capitalist praxis – a reference that roots their claim to authentic ethical selfhood not in flimsy identifications with distant others, but in the very practice they hold responsible for the misery they are trying to remedy: capitalist exchange. And if even oppositional practices source their moral impetus from their involvement in the ordinary praxis of consumer capitalism it seems to be high time for the various forms of mainstream consumerism to be re-examined as, possibly, a less articulate form of “ethical consumption”.

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## images



image 1: Cafédirect 5065 instant coffee

## Abstract

### **Ethical Consumption – the Case of Fairtrade (Or: Being a Consumer and Being Good)**

Neoliberal capitalism constitutes consumption as realm of freedom and thus as central field for expressing authentic selfhood. But this freedom also defines consumers as ultimately responsible for their choices, rendering the construction and expression of self in consumption potentially a moral project. Ethical consumption actualises this potential as it is not only an attempt to use market power to achieve moral and/or political aims (*doing* good) but also a practice in which consumers can construct and express themselves as ethical persons – (*being* good). In order to achieve this, acts of ethical consumption need to be communicated as expression of an authentic character disposition. I will argue that this is mainly achieved through linking the moral cause up to an aesthetic

preference structure in what I will describe as “ethical taste” and as “taste-for-ethics”. The authenticity of the thus constituted ethical self is warranted by referring back to a promise of equitable exchange implied by the everyday practice of consumer capitalism.

Keywords: consumer culture, ethical consumption, fairtrade, authenticity

## **Zusammenfassung**

### **Ethischer Konsum am Fallbeispiel des Fairen Handels (oder: Konsument Sein und Gut Sein)**

Im neoliberalen Kapitalismus wird Konsum als Reich der Freiheit zum Hauptfeld authentischen Selbstaudrucks. Die Annahme solcher Freiheit unterstellt zugleich Verantwortung für die Konsumwahl, wodurch Konstruktion und Ausdruck von Subjektivität im Konsum potentiell zum moralischen Projekt gerät. Ethischer Konsum aktualisiert diese Potential. Es geht ihm nicht allein um das Erreichen moralischer oder politischer Ziele durch Einsatz der Marktmacht von Verbrauchern (i.e. *Gutes-Tun*), sondern auch darum, die Konsumierenden als ethische Personen zu konstituieren und auszudrücken (i.e. *Gut-Sein*). Um dies zu erreichen, muss ethischer Konsum als Ausdruck eines authentischen Charakters kommuniziert werden. Dies wird durch eine Verankerung des moralischen Anliegens in der ästhetischen Präferenzstruktur erreicht – durch „ethischen Geschmack“ einerseits und einem „Geschmack an Ethik“ andererseits. Die Authentizität des so konstituierten ethischen Selbsts wird durch einen Rückbezug auf ein in konsumkapitalistischer Alltagspraxis verankertes implizites Versprechen auf Tauschgerechtigkeit verbürgt.

Stichworte:

Konsumkultur, Ethischer Konsum, Fairer Handel, Authentizität