

Consuming the Campesino

Fair Trade Marketing between Recognition and Romantic Commodification

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Abstract

This paper aims to reconstruct the everyday moral plausibility of Fair Trade consumerism by linking it back to an analysis of the moral grammar of capitalist consumer culture and understanding it as both an actualization and development of this moral grammar. Fair Trade movements re-moralize global markets by insisting on a just price for Third-World produce. The paradigm for fair exchange is the equitability implied in ordinary practices of commodity exchange while such equitability is constantly negated by the fact of capitalist accumulation. Fair Trade is also an attempt to tap into the recognition function of market exchange in order to move away from charity and its paternalistic implications. As this proves not entirely possible on a voluntary basis, the price gap between conventionally traded and Fair Trade products needs to be justified by non-altruistic motives such as increased material and symbolic use values. These include romanticised images of commodified agricultural and artisanal producers. By this romanticization, Fair Trade conjures up the ghost of colonialism, failing to deliver full equity and recognition, but thereby also insisting on the need for final de-colonization.

Keywords: Fair Trade, ethical consumption, consumerism, recognition, advertising

Introduction

Fair Trade has been hailed as the ethical consumer's answer to world poverty and global exploitation, a serious challenge to the current terms of trade (e.g. Nicholls and Opal, 2004), a step towards a global consumer democracy (e.g. Waridel, 2002: 21ff.), a serious challenge to commodity fetishism (e.g. Bryant and Goodman, 2004; Hudson and Hudson, 2003) and as establishing 'relations based on "trust", "respect" and "partnership"' (Raynolds, 2002: 410). But it has also been criticized for failing to deliver on these promises. Instead, critics say, it constitutes an unquestioned support of the ideology of consumer sovereignty (Johnston, 2001), 'clean-washing' the image of high street retailers (Low and Davenport, 2005) and serving consumers' taste for the exotic rather than promoting global justice (Wright, 2004). While both sides in this debate make quite strong moral claims, the *ethics* that is supposed to inform Fair Trade and judgements about it remains largely inarticulate, taking for granted general agreement about what is fair and what is not. Where made topical, however, interpretations of Fair Trade ethics have failed to explicate what is self-evident about the morality of Fair Trade. Instead, examinations of the ethics of Fair Trade have so far, with the exception of Barnett, Cloke et al. (2005), consisted in examinations of contemporary currents of moral philosophy, asking if and how they justified practices of ethical consumption (e.g. Boda, 2001, Barnett, Calfaro et al. 2005).

In contrast to this mix-and-match method of assigning legitimacy to a practice of consumption I propose to reconstruct the everyday moral plausibility of Fair Trade consumerism by linking it back to an analysis of the moral grammar of capitalist consumer culture (Varul, 2005b) and understanding it as both an actualization and development of this moral grammar. Fair Trade will be understood as an attempt to bring the moral subtext of consumer capitalism to the surface and – exposing its unfulfilled promises – to turn it against the practices of consumption it seemed to justify. This approach, however, leads into contradictions of its own, culminating in commodification of the producers and thus undercutting the aim to provide the recognition that is denied in mere charity.

The Fairness of the Fair-Trade Consumer

The notion of ‘ethical consumerism’ seems to be a contradiction in terms, since market and morality are commonly viewed as stark opposites with morality being sought in the contestation of certain goods’ commodity status (Radin, 1996) and in the blocking of certain exchanges (Walzer, 1983: 97ff.). The money mediation of modern life creates a moral vacuum (Marx and Engels, 1979, Simmel, 1990), and this vacuum needs to be filled by a stylization of life, by consumers finding ways of ethical self-determination. The re-invention of the contemporary citizen as commodity-choosing consumer (Gabriel and Lang, 1995) – like all construction of free subjects – requires the problematization of freedom

in an ethos (Foucault, 1987: 117). Ethical consumer campaign groups and alternative trade organizations amplify this requirement but also offer the consumer guidance in the articulation of ethical obligation and provide for the 'practical means of translating this obligation into actual conduct' (Barnett, Cloke et al., 2005: 36f.) – thereby, in a way, governing the moralization of consumer behaviour.

Beyond (or rather: before) all deontological or consequential reasoning, a crucial function of ethical behaviour is the self-reassurance and expression of an ethical character; the possession of a sense of justice. This requires the *display* of ethical practices of consumption vis-à-vis socially relevant others in search for assent or confrontation (Barnett, Cloke et al., 2005: 37ff.). The use of Fair Trade produce as 'badge of social belonging' (Zadek et al., 1998: 32ff.) and moral superiority (Shaw and Clarke, 1999: 16) is, therefore, not only to be seen as a practice of distinction by means of 'conspicuous compassion' (West, 2004) but also part of ethical consumerism's ethicality.

Thus, approaches from conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1994) and from character (Campbell, 1990) need to be complementary (Varul, 2006). The conspicuously acted out ethicality constitutes a commitment to character consistency (the ethical aspect of what McCracken, 1988: 119ff. describes as the 'Diderot effect') – and, vice-versa, this consistency of character is in permanent need of social confirmation.

While the governmentality perspective proposed by Barnett, Cloke et al., focusing on practices as techniques of power and self, succeeds in demonstrating how agencies of Fair Trade establish moral *accountability* and thereby 'help to govern the consuming self' (Barnet, Cloke et al., 2005: 36) such an approach stops short of acknowledging the logic of such moral *accounts* themselves.

Yet, for the construction of ethical subjects the inner logic of the articulated moral claims as well as of those tacitly implied by the ethical practice cannot be arbitrary. Due to the committing nature of social action (Winch, 1958: 50) they are central in the formulation of expectations regarding future behaviour. What Garfinkel (1984: 4) calls the 'rational accountability of practical actions as an ongoing practical accomplishment' entails the expectation of specific accounts which in turn operates as quasi-panoptical enforcement of consistency in observed practice.

In order to understand the ethicality of Fair Trade it is crucial to understand Fair Trade not as just a *case* of ethical consumerism, but also look at the specific nature of the ethics involved. The major difference, the defining characteristic of Fair Trade is that the object of moralization is trade itself. Normally, ethical consumption uses the power of the consumer to achieve certain moral goals *beyond* the market. The defining act is *not* to buy commodities that contain certain substances, involve certain rejected practices of production, benefit a certain political regime etc. The role of *alternative* goods is here literally that of a replacement for the rejected. Animal welfare is, in the eyes of a vegan, not

furthered by *buying* a soy-based *ersatz* product but by *not buying* milk. Fair Trade, too, contains the commitment not to buy products that are made from ingredients whose production involves extreme exploitation. But the aims of Fair Trade are not achieved by a boycott alone, as that would simply turn the exploited into the unemployed. As Johnston (2001) points out, Fair Trade 'does not include the choice of not buying'.

Fair Trade therefore aims at changing the market relations themselves (Bryant and Goodman, 2004), beginning with 'explicitly advertising [...] conditions of production' (Hudson and Hudson, 2003: 419) in order to 'make transparent the relations under which commodities are exchanged' (Raynolds, 2000: 298). The aim of Fair Trade is to establish equitable commercial relations between the First and the Third World by, first of all, making sure that producers receive a *just price*.

But what makes a 'just price'? In order not to re-embark on fruitless attempts to use philosophical and theological theories to explain everyday concepts I will try to link back the assumption of justice in pricing to the *practices* of production, exchange and consumption it emerges from. In terms of the moral grammar of capitalism, our everyday experience as sellers of labour power and buyers of commodities, supported by our 'belief in a just world' (Lerner, 1980), can suggest that we approximately, and on average, receive from the consumer market what we have expended in terms of work on the labour market (even though this moral grammar bypasses the issue of accumulation based on the extraction of

surplus value). The supply and demand on the market, expressing an amalgamate of individual desires, power struggles and cultural perceptions of value, establishes a tradition of how productive activities compare to each other in terms of value – creating the impression that it is an inherent property of those activities that makes them valuable rather than market exchange (cf. Varul, 2005a; 2005b). Fair Trade mobilizes this implicit morality of the capitalist economy in order to point to injustices in trade with Third World producers: What we pay for our coffee cannot possibly support the reproduction of the producer's labour power. While, normally, the exchange rate in the market establishes what will be perceived as the objective value of labour in the first place, there are limits to plausibility – and if the exchange on the global market leaves the Third World producer with 'a standard of living that is a bare twentieth of our own' (Brown, 1993: 3) there must be something wrong; the market has failed in to produce even the appearance of equitability. In his pioneering text Michael Barrat Brown projects that ideally, 'a price can be assigned to the product which takes some account of hours and artistic skill involved in the product, with a bit added for the cause of Third World development.' (Brown 1993: 162). The *Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International* (FLO) floor price aims at precisely this, namely 'to cover the cost of production' according to the formula 'Fair Trade floor price = cost of production + cost of living + cost of complying with Fair Trade standards.' (Nicholls and Opal 2004: 41)

It is clear that it is impossible to achieve anything like an exact match between price and labour value, to determine what a 'truly fair price' should be (Renard 1999: 497) – but this does not affect the aim as a practically relevant ideal. In the domestic market the expectation is that fair trading in the sense of competitive trading, the exclusion of cartels and monopolies, will establish, on average, correct evaluations of the productive effort contained in a commodity. In the world markets for coffee, tea, cocoa and exotic fruit, this does not seem to work. The obvious remedy here would be to regulate this market in ways similar to the domestic market. As there is, at the moment, no such regulation or any regulatory body that would be able or even only willing to establish it, Fair Trade is intended as a remedy that utilises, in the absence of governmental power, consumer power as a means of global governance in order to make 'the free trade system work the way it is supposed to' (Nicholls and Opal, 2004: 31). In this respect Fair Trade does not operate 'in and against the market' (Brown 1993: 156) but against a certain *type* of market (the current neo-liberal world market), while promoting another type (the embedded one its consumers themselves already experience as their own economic habitat). It is for this reason that in the current Fair Trade discourse 'no criteria for "fairness" exist to protect workers in advanced capitalist countries' (Fridell 2003: 6) since those countries are the paradigm for what is to be established globally. The fairness of market relations in the North is, in this sense, taken for granted.

But it is not only the implementation of a just price itself that Fair Trade aims for. The use of the market has an additional function that is quite crucial to the whole project: In promoting 'trade not aid' (Rice 2001: 47), Fair Trade is an attempt to go beyond charitable giving and the paternalistic implications that come with it (Godelier, 1996: 291; Heldke, 1992). Nicholls and Opal (2004: 30) claim that the market approach 'preserves the dignity of their labour'. But why should that be so? That receiving money in market exchanges is more dignified than receiving gifts is so self-evident that nobody seems to wonder why. Elsewhere (Varul, 2005b) I have argued that the recognition function of market exchange gains its strength from its *not being intended* as an act of recognition. Precisely because the buyer gives the seller money *not* in order to express anything about the producer but *only* to satisfy their own need, want or desire this act expresses the social utility of the product and therefore the social worth of the producer. In market exchange productive contribution is recognized in a callous and strictly utilitarian way - thereby relieving the successful participant from obligations of gratitude, putting an end to their 'engulfment' in more paternalistic systems of domination (Cohen, 1974: 148).

As commodity producers (and be it only as assumed 'producers' of their own labour power) they have to subject themselves to the domination of market demand structures, which of course are 'democratic' only by appearance. But reward and recognition 'earned' in this subjection materialize when producers turn consumers and, by the money in their pocket, command other people's

labour – evidencing the market society's indebtedness towards the successful market citizen.

Against this background the critique of commercialization, the move from an emphasis on solidarity towards an emphasis of use value for the consumer crucially misses the point. The shift from solidarity towards use value for the consumer (Levi and Linton, 2003) does not give up ethical content in order to maximize the market for an ethical good (as e.g. Wright, 2004, suggests). On the contrary: it increases the ethical efficacy of Fair Trade by cutting out the remainders of charitableness which always affirms the inferiority of the recipient in an unbalanced gift exchange.

But there is a catch. Use value must come from somewhere, and it is unlikely that all Fair Trade produce can be improved in a way that justifies a higher price in a competitive consumer market while still maintaining the social 'extra' that spares producers the catastrophic downturns of the world market. After all, the aim remains 'to pay as much as possible, not as little as possible to the producer' – ideally 'at competitive prices' but as this is not feasible 'at prices that are acceptable to consumers because they know that the extra pay is going to those who are in need.' (Brown, 1993: 163). The problem is clear: the element of charity (though it might be labelled 'solidarity') does not go away that easily.

One remedy to this contradiction/ dilemma is to add *symbolic* use value. Fair Trade has taken a page out of the book of mainstream commercial advertising and has learned that people consume images as much as material products. For

market recognition this makes no difference as social utility, use value, lies not in some objectively rational utility, as neo-Marxist critics of commodity aesthetics hold (e.g. Haug 1971), but in the satisfaction of 'human wants of some sort or another'; and whether such wants 'spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference' (Marx, 1996: 45). Advertising, if successful, therefore *is* an enhancement of the product's use value (Wernick, 1991: 30)

A cost-effective and seemingly morally unproblematic solution is the romantic commodification of the act of production itself and of the producers that has been exposed in its 'de-fetishizing' efforts.

If commodity fetishism is understood as the determination of value behind the backs of the producers, hiding the social character of that determination and imbuing them with a subjectivity of their own (Marx, 1996: 81ff.), then Fair Trade is indeed working towards de-fetishization. And to an extent Fair Trade also manages to evade Marx's verdict on mere 'lifting the veil' (Hudson and Hudson, 2003) that 'while removing all appearance of mere accidentality from the determination of the magnitude of the values of products, yet in no way alters the mode in which that determination takes place' (Marx, 1996: 86). The way value is assigned is changed and transformed into a more conscious social relation (Hudson and Hudson, 2003: 421).

There are, however, two caveats to be kept in mind. First of all, as Hudson and Hudson (2003: 426) indicate, the consumer is not pulled out from under the veil and unequal relations of exchange within the developed world are not

addressed. More fundamentally even, one could say that in still using money, the commodity fetish's 'most glaring form' (Marx, 1996: 103) as an unquestioned tool of expressing equitability such de-fetishization is flawed. Not only is it incomplete as the exchange takes place in the 'same absurd form' (Marx, 1996: 87), it is self-defeating as the use of money as measurement of value gains further objectivity and its being a social relation in itself is even more emphatically denied.

The other concern is that the act of de-fetishization, in its one-sidedness and incompleteness, has the tendency of transforming the unveiled concrete labour itself into a commodity, as Bryant and Goodman (2004: 359) observe:

'Fair trade knowledge flows thus act to re-work the fetish surrounding fair trade commodities into a new type of alternative "spectacle" for Northern consumers.'

Commodification 'of people and place through the penetrating vision of the discursive fields of fair trade' seems to be the inevitable price to pay for the 'de-fetishizing move' (Goodman, 2004: 902).

Romantic Commodification

I use the term of '*romantic* commodification' to indicate a specific use value realized in commodities which Campbell (1987) identifies as a legacy of the Romantic movement. Here it is not so much through the 'manipulation of objects' but primarily 'through a degree of control of their meaning' by using the

'power of imagination' that pleasure is gained (Campbell, 1987: 76). As Campbell (1987: 83ff.) explains, the specific trait of the romantic use of the imagination lies in the conjuring up of daydreams, indulging in possible, but not really actualized experiences, effecting an imaginative extension of the self. McCracken (1988: 106) calls this the 'displacing of meanings' in the sense that ambitions, longings etc. which cannot be realized to their full extent or would come with unacceptable costs are imagined into a place remote in space/time (or even a parallel world) – remote but not completely impossible so that what 'is otherwise unsubstantiated and potentially improbable in the present world is now validated, somehow "proven", by its existence in another, distant one.' As Campbell (1987: 83) puts it, '[t]he key point about such exercises is that images are elaborated in order to increase pleasure and not for any other reason, yet they still contain that element of possibility which separates them from pure fantasy.' Hence, while romantic commodification is about the manipulation of meanings rather than objects the material objects and their material history do still matter here.

Fair Trade goods seem to have a natural tendency to invite romantic daydreams, an elective affinity to romantic consumerism that constitutes a competitive advantage of its own. Other than most mass produced consumer goods, Fair Trade goods by default refer back to remote regions in a highly credible way. Fair Trade can rely on mutually supportive indices of *distance* and *authenticity* in connection with the testified existence of the substrates of its imagination.

The topic of distance is obvious and built into the concept. Wright (2004) shows that distant landscapes are part and parcel of Fair Trade packaging and marketing. The thought of domestically produced Fair Trade products seems an unlikely one and where this is actually tried and promoted, such as in the case of *American Apparel*, this necessitates the construction of distance within the consumer's proximity – a Fourth World encapsulated within the First (cf. Moor and Littler 2005). Fair Trade as 'acting at a distance' (Whatmore and Thorne, 1997) itself can become a romantic concept if the consumer is projected as empowered actor into faraway lands, without having to bear consequences of entering final commitments: unproblematic Anita-Roddick-style 'identificatory investments' (Littler, 2005: 238).

The Fair Trade imagination is dominated by agricultural and artisanal producers in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia – traditional settings for all sorts of daydreaming activities of white Europeans and North Americans, Joseph-Conrad-Land. The dreams hinged onto this imagery can range from radical Left identifications with national liberation movements, which allow the consumer to imagine themselves as *guerrillero*,¹ to post-colonial dreams supported by more mainstream products of the culture industry such as the film dramatisation of *Out of Africa*, which allow the consumer to imagine themselves as a benevolent colonial master or mistress (cf. McClintock 1995: 14f.).

With the spatial remoteness comes a temporal one. In continuity with colonial ideology '[g]eographical difference across space is figured as a historical

difference across time.’ (McClintock 1995: 40), only now what is figured is no longer the colonial image of primitiveness but the colonial past itself, including the struggles of de-colonization. And just as the primitive past invoked in colonial commodity imageries is an idealized one (idealized both in its alleged cruelty and in its alleged harmony), so is the post-colonial evocation of the colonial past. The post-colonial citizen of the Third World is imagined as suffering, simple and benevolent – Third World intellectuality, for instance, is, predominantly, systematically denied. This has implications for to the issue of equity: Fair Trade is about what is perceived to be simple manual labour power that *seems* to be relatively easy to calculate. In disregard of the skills involved in tropical farming and traditional handicraft Third World work is, by being rewarded still only by the equivalent of provision sufficient for physical reproduction, health care and basic education, equated to that hypothetical construct ‘simple average labour’ (Marx 1996: 54) without any multiplication factor for intensity or skill. Crafts are deemed particularly suitable for Fair Trade marketing for this very reason: their assumed easy calculability due to an alleged simplicity (Brown, 1993: 162). In contrast, the intangibility of work in other sectors, such as tourism, has been identified as a problem for Fair Trade marketing (Cleverdon and Kalisch, 2000: 175f.).

Another promotional benefit of agriculture and crafts is the perception of authenticity that comes with it. What, indeed, could be more authentic than the native peasant on their soil? Fair Trade criteria make sure that farming follows

perceived traditional lines by decreeing that the producer group certified as ethical 'must consist of small growers who depend on family labor' (Rice, 2001: 47). Third World artisanal products convey, as Scrase (2003: 458) puts it: 'the experience of authenticity and traditionalism in a way that symbolically connects the commodity back to the producer' - thus offering the consumer an escape from 'the hyperreal world of mass, packaged consumption' by providing an anchor 'in a real world of labour production'.

But how is authenticity established? Certainly, the origins and material history of the good is important, but as Spooner (1986: 226) points out, authenticity may on the one hand 'in fact inhere in the object' but on the other hand it 'derives from our concern with it.' Authenticity in a commodity is an amalgam of material properties, the history of production and transfers that are coagulated in it, and the cultural and moral criteria the receiver expects to be fulfilled in such an object. The object itself can bear marks indicating its authenticity, but on their own these can never be conclusive. The task of authentication is transferred to and appropriated by gatekeeper agencies and organizations (Spooner, 1986: 225) like, in the case of Fair Trade, the FTO who by labelling ethically correct goods reassure the consumer about the status of the objects purchased (cf. also Zadek et al., 1998).

Additionally, little stories, statements, and photographs of producers are provided in producer vignettes. These do not only fulfil the purpose of reassuring the consumer of the fairness of the product, but also add a sense of

authenticity. Those vignettes are invested with considerably more credibility than the merely fictional accounts one usually finds in commercials. Authenticity thus guaranteed is further illustrated by the commodity itself, by recourse to a particular type of/ brand of post-colonial and 'ethnic' commodity aesthetics (Johnson, 2001; Dwyer and Jackson, 2003).

The search for authenticity puts a cap on what can be achieved through Fair Trade. If allegedly simple manual labour is the preferred mode of production then the reproductive needs to go into the calculation of the floor price will remain simple as well. One effect is that the authentic Fair Trade producer remains solely a *producer* without ever becoming a full member of the global *consumer* society. This cuts off one half of the market recognition process that is to be established. The temporal inversion of universal serfdom in production to universal lordship in consumption - that vital part of contemporary capitalist economic and social citizenship - is denied, and the emancipation from serfdom to the neoliberal world market stops halfway in its tracks. The authenticity of the Fair Trade producer is not based on a position of strength enabling 'reluctant engagement' as safeguard for a cultural identity but a reactive one. 'Realness' is asserted reacting to a world market demand which, by its nature, remains 'vulnerable to global market forces' (one part of which are Northern ethical consumers), because it is not the 'strength of their own political mobilization' but 'the sustained interest of outsiders in their well-being, and the lucky turn of events in their favor' (Wherry, 2006: 18) that sustains economic survival. If

Northern consumers want Southern producers, whose image is part of the commodity, to be humble and content peasants, then they have the power to keep them in their place. The 'extension of self' (Belk, 1988) achieved in this mode of consumption feeds on others' authenticity without itself achieving authenticity that denotes 'not retreat into an imaginary world (a *U-topia*), but a transformation of this one' (Baugh, 1988: 484). Maintaining the authentic otherness of the producer, therefore, is imperative. Gould (2003: 344) in his auto-ethnographic account of his Fair Trade consumption gives voice to this concern with maintaining the authenticity of the other:

'Supporting the arts and crafts of indigenous peoples also provides them with the choice of staying in their homelands, where they can continue with their traditional and anti-consumerist way of life. Yet, I see in Mario Hernandez's buying his house a limit to this notion. The lure of "the upper world from which advertisements and television and airplanes come..." is strong. Has Mario also joined the massed ranks of consumers?'

The imbalance asserted and defended here is that the Northern consumer may indulge in romantic daydreams about the authentic existence of the producer, but in order to enable those counter-factual projections of identity, the Southern producer's existence must remain fixated to prevent the 'depleting the imaginary resources of the exotic' (Kaplan, 1995: 59). The option of the *campesino* becoming a consumer is denied as consumerism in others is lamented in a vicarious anti-

consumerism whose own readiness to sacrifice is rather doubtful (Miller, 2001: 228).

As Spooner (1986: 230f.) points out, those imbued by us with traditional authenticity might themselves seek authenticity in our present as we seek it in their past; they might long for the comforts of not only a decent house but of access to a decently cloned high street where they could authenticate their full membership in a global market society. It is not just consumption as satisfaction of basic needs (the need for which is obvious and beyond dispute), but the dignity involved in less rational, symbolic consumption that would provide full market recognition (Varul, 2006: 101).

Because Fair Trade fails to achieve consumerism in the Third World, it fails to do what was intended by the move from aid to trade: to establish producers' dignity on the basis of utilitarian, selfish, market recognition rather than on pity and charity.

Two Campaigns

To illustrate I will present two cases of Fair Trade marketing's attempts to avoid the pitfalls of the project to achieve equity and recognition through commerce in distinctive ways: the *Traidcraft* mail order catalogue and the recent *Divine Chocolate* advertising campaign.

Traidcraft is, presumably due to its explicitly Christian background, an organization that is less concerned with excluding the charitable element. They

also seem to have not much of a problem with the conventionally alternative commodity aesthetics that limits their marketing to a certain lifestyle segment. Their marketing is group specific, relying on a core of more committed campaigners and a steadily growing community who receives their catalogues or buy from their 'Fair Traders' who promote *Traidcraft* products in a largely personal or smaller community context. In contrast, *Divine Chocolate* tries to go down the road of commercialization as far as possible with the explicit target of reaching far beyond the already widened Fair Trade clientele, running an ad campaign in magazines like *Elle* and *Marie Claire*. This campaign marginalizes the 'fairness' aspect and focuses on the material and aesthetic use value of the promoted chocolates, in the widest sense. I will argue that neither approach manages to escape the dilemmas outlined above.

The *Traidcraft* Catalogue

My first example will be the *Traidcraft* mail order catalogue. *Traidcraft* is a Christian organization operating as both a development charity (*Traidcraft Exchange*) and as a trading company (*Traidcraft plc*). They quarterly issue a slim mail order catalogue offering mainly clothing but also stationary, coffee, tea, snack bars, handcrafted kitchenware, small furniture and accessories, wooden toys etc.

With *Traidcraft*, the name already tells the story. The marketing of *Traidcraft* moves in a field of tension between charity (*aid*), market recognition (*trade*) and

authenticity (*craft*) – and as argued above, this mixture has a potential to lead into contradictions.

Traid – charity through the market?

The theme of aid is not only injected into the organizational name but pervades much of the *Traidcraft* style of communication. The customer is, in an introductory statement, addressed as ‘Dear Friend’, i.e. in the style common for charity appeals. The organization explicitly presents itself as ‘a Christian response to poverty’ and includes as core concepts ‘Support’ next to ‘Trade’, and ‘Give’ next to ‘Buy’. In this context the consumer is confirmed as being able to help and therefore as powerful while the producers who are introduced throughout the catalogue in small producer vignettes are portrayed as needy, lacking and grateful.

In itself, and taken seriously, Christian charity is supposed to be built on the humility of both the receiver *and* the giver of alms, so that, as Sugden (1999: 11) says in a programmatic statement for *Traidcraft*, ‘people be servants of one another.’ Nevertheless, the need is felt to move, and be it incompletely, from aid to trade, precisely in order to reduce the imbalance implied in charity, bringing about real mutuality of service. The transition is managed in that aid is conceptualized as enabling trade, as producers ‘often lack the knowledge and skills to access markets’. The idea clearly is help to self-help, which also, to an extent, retracts the assurance that receiving gifts can be as dignified as giving.

Dignity is to be found as producer for the market where God's grace by which 'they are not damnable and useless people' (Sugden 1999: 11) can be actualized and confirmed. The fact of not being useless is testified, in the last instance, by getting hold of money not as alms but as price or wage for work. Throughout the catalogue, the consumer is reminded of the labour content of the goods offered, labour value that justifies an income securing the reproduction of this labour power by providing for sufficient food, shelter, health care and basic education.

The other side of the labour value equivalence, however, is missing. Leisure in the *Traidcraft* catalogue is a privilege of the Northern consumer whose entitlement to the products does not need to be justified, as labour value objectified in money is already in their possession. Their wealth does not need to be justified by hints to productive efforts (sometimes, though, a laptop in a corner indicates superior information-technological skills) – the very fact of being wealthy testifies to their (or their partner's) worth as producers.

The wealth of the assumed consumer contrasts with the poverty of the producers and their families throughout the catalogue. The assignment of roles (consumers/producers) is clear and unambiguous. The 'People behind the Products' merely appear as just that: producers. The customer learns about their work and what they are told about their consumption is that it is *reproductive* at a basic level. Woodcarver Alois Paul of Bombolulu, Kenya is quoted saying: 'I have a wife and three children, aged eleven, thirteen and fifteen. They can eat because the work I get here.' Beyond basic food, consumption consists in productive

consumption, reinvestment, and other reproductive investments like schools and health services. As Lyon (2006: 458) in her study of a Fair Trade cooperative in Guatemala found, 'earnings enabled them to maintain their families, but not necessarily to get ahead'.

By displaying luxury consumers in larger pictures with smaller producer vignettes at the page margins a quasi colonial mistress/servant relation is emerging in which the mistress is benevolent but nevertheless unquestionably privileged, enjoying Veblenian conspicuous leisure and consumption on the basis of what still is very cheap labour, affording a minimum reproduction of labour power (images 1 and 2).² The visualization of the craft labour in the product enhances its secondary utility in conspicuous consumption:

'Hand labour is a more wasteful method of production; hence the goods turned out by this method are more serviceable for the purpose of pecuniary reputability.' (Veblen 1994: 159)

The inferiority implied in the needy status assigned to the producers by maintaining the 'aid' aspect is not remedied by a convincing account of fair exchange beyond granting what is very basic requirements of decency. To the contrary, that the exchange is defined as 'fair' affirms the unintentionally stated difference in worth. Producers in the Third World, when confronted with the images and realities with First World consumption of their products, are reported to find those frivolous to say the least (Lyon, 2006: 458; Fisher, 1997:

132). The recognition achieved by the producers is not that of equal commercial partners, it is more similar to that of the deserving poor of the old liberal discourses of charity (Clarke et al., 1987) who have a right to a decent standard of living as they may not be productive to market requirements, but at least they do all they can and also limit their spending to virtuous, i.e. labour-power reproducing, purposes.

This is exacerbated even further by it not being the quality of their work alone that justifies the price but a symbolic use value not *added by* but *inhering in* the producer who becomes commodified in the process.

Craft – the curse of authenticity

Authenticity of exotic craft and agricultural products is a major selling point of *Traidcraft*. This is communicated in the waiver

‘As many of the products are handmade and natural dyes used, the size and colour of products may vary slightly to those shown. In the case of fairly traded handicrafts, the supplier is identified’.

Not only are catalogue items authentic because they are made by traceably real people in the distance (‘established *Traidcraft overseas* suppliers’ – italics added) but also because each is made in its own act of production – each is unique. What is put in as an excuse for the varying quality of a hand-crafted product turns out as itself an advertisement of its culturally founded superiority – thereby confirming the superior taste of the Fair Trade shopper (Wright, 2004).

Besides the display of the recipients of aid and the partners in trade, the third function of the producer vignettes is to document this authenticity. This authenticity does not consist only in the uniqueness of the product but first of all in its *origins*, in its coming from the hands of the native – a nativeness that is warranted mainly by display of ethnicity. The factual reproduction of a benign colonialism, is therefore repeated on a symbolic level.

The post-colonial consumer displayed in the catalogue lives on the colonial identities of the native. There is an agenda of development, but this development is not to transgress the fixed identities that are to provide the aesthetic backcloth of the consumer. For her, ethnicity is no longer an issue, colonial racialism is eliminated by deliberately choosing White and non-White models whose “race” does not impact at all on the social status displayed – and neither does it connect them to an assumed origin: they all equally can don a more Laura-Ashley inspired upper middle class style or a more ethnic chic as non-committing quotations. But this post-modern cosmopolitan consumer discourse feeds on the identifiable otherness of the producer – and that includes unambiguous pre-modern ethnicity. The geographic originality of the product is visualized by the geographic originality of the producers. The longing for unambiguousness (Gilroy, 2004: 39) is displaced and contained, but in the ethno-racial scheme of thought is not finally disposed of; it lures at the fringes of the commodity world and is re-imported in a defused way.³ While indeterminate ‘ethnic chic’ combining multiple cultural patterns is an option for the Western consumer

(Dwyer and Jackson, 2003), Westernization is usually frowned upon in the Third World producer – they are denied the ‘*right to ambiguity*’ (McClintock 1995: 68) whose exercise by the consumer of ethnic goods relies on the non-ambiguity of their producers.

The producers, as exhibits of authenticity, can be viewed not only as little images in the catalogue and on the website, but also in reality. The caption under several vignettes announces:

‘You can visit this producer on a Traidcraft People to People Tour. To find out more information please visit www.peopletopeopletours.com’.

The tour to Kenya, for example, comes as an ethnic safari where the opportunity to ‘interact with “jua kali” artisans, view their activities and share a lunch with them’ combines with a visit to the ‘world famous Maasai Mara Game Reserve’ and a stay at the seaside. Tours like this are both an instrument to create credibility of the Fair Trade standards (Cleverdon and Kalish, 2000: 177) and an opportunity to create further revenues to be used to enhance producers’ livelihoods – but at the same time they provide a quasi-colonial experience in which an inspection of the workshops and plantations is combined with leisurely activities. The producers, on the other hand, do not travel freely – neither spatially nor culturally. They have nothing to sell but their authenticity. The leather passport wallet (image 3) displayed in the Spring 2006 catalogue truly is a

symbol of how customers go global by denying the globalization of those on whose backs they are travelling: post-Imperial Leather.

In the end it seems to be the persistence of portrayal of the producer as needy and therefore inferior that keeps them in the position of servant. The potential of the market to turn people into 'servants of *one another*' is not realized due to the decision not to commercialize their produce entirely, thereby ending the unintended commodification of the producers. But can such commercialization actually work? To find an answer, I turn to those who have gone down the commercial road furthest and most aggressively:

Divine Chocolate

Divine is the brand name of chocolate traded by the *Day Chocolate Company*, which is owned by the Fair Trade organization *Twin Trading* (52%), the *Kuapa Kokoo* cocoa farmers' co-operative in Ghana (33%) and the *Body Shop* (14%). *Divine* chocolates are labelled as Fairtrade by the FLO.

Even more than other Fair Trade brands *Divine* has moved on from selling mainly on the basis of the solidarity value of its products to material use value, taste. *Divine* chocolate in no way has to make good for inferior product quality in comparison to its competitors, but still is slightly more expensive as it must, other than the likes of *Nestlé* and *Kraft*, fulfil its double bottom line of economic and social viability. So, while the product is competitive on a level of quality, its price still needs to be justified in terms of justice or solidarity. In order to go

beyond this, *Divine* needs to add symbolic use value to its brand, engage in a consciously designed commodity aesthetic in order to push into uncharted mass markets. This is the declared aim of the campaign analyzed here, which is described in a press release as ‘a significant step-change in Fairtrade marketing, which is fast moving on from its purely activist image.’ The ads appear in ‘women’s consumer magazines and national newspapers’. They are professionally made and appear to be based primarily on commercial commodity aesthetics, only very marginally alluding to the conditions of production (images 4 and 5). Hence they clearly do not fulfil the expectations regarding de-fetishization voiced by some authors. On the other hand this might be the key to normalizing the market recognition of the producers providing for the ‘mainstreaming’ that should eliminate the post-colonial subtext of conventional Fair Trade marketing. But on a closer look it becomes clear that in its attempt to mainstream its aesthetics *Divine* actually only takes a huge step *out* of Fair Trade post-colonialism and *into* commercial post-colonialism while retaining a subtle but fateful anchor into Fair Trade semantics.

Both ads feature young African women in flirtatious postures showing the viewer an unwrapped piece of chocolate, creating, by offering it without packaging out of their hands, a sense of intimacy between model and viewer. In terms of the usual association between sex and chocolate one gets in advertisements, these here are rather restrained. What nevertheless remains is that the prospective consumer’s desire is directed not so much towards the

chocolate but to the women offering it. In the 'personalized format' a 'direct relation between product and personality defines the primary framework of the ad' (Leiss, Kline and Jhally 1997: 246). In this variant of the personalized format, following the paradigm of the Marlboro Man 'the person is not present to "stand behind" the product so much as to "stand for" it.' (Leiss, Kline, and Jhally, 1997: 254). This is often used where the burden of differentiation between products is on the image rather than on its material use value (cf. Williamson, 1978: 24ff.). While conventional upmarket chocolate advertisement has shifted to a lifestyle format, emphasizing the consumer experience and thereby addressing different lifestyle groups, Fair Trade advertising is stuck with the origins and thus reactivates the old colonial association between contently producing and serving Black Africans and chocolate (Ramamurthy, 2003), combining it (though mitigated) with the omnipresent sexualization of commodity aesthetics (Haug, 1971: 67ff.).

Divine tries to disperse suspicions of 'commodity racism' (McClintock, 1995: 33) that such an identification of African women and chocolate amounts to by evoking the political context of Fair Trade in the ad's margins. But the slogans 'Serious Chocolate Appeal' and 'Equality Treat' deliberately hover between the indicated political message (equality, appeal [for solidarity]), and teasing (treat, [sex] appeal) while leaving the point of reference deliberately messy. Of course, the *chocolate* offered qualifies as a "treat" and without doubt it is produced under conditions that are set up to promote equality – appealing both to the taste buds

and the conscience. The political side of the appeal also refers to the women portrayed as they are identified as members of the co-operative producing the raw materials. In differentiation to traditional Fair Trade advertising they are deliberately chosen to also appeal to a Western audience and its eroticized expectations, implying, in turn, that they themselves are the treat. They are commodified just like the producers in the Traidcraft catalogue – only in a more unashamed way.

But all models in advertisement are commodified – so is not this simply a price to be paid for the normalization of Fair Trade produce as commodities that do not sell on the basis of charitableness and authenticity? Not really. The models featuring in conventional chocolate advertising are portrayed as *consumers* – so while they themselves are commodified as part of the symbolic use value of the product, they are not commodified as the character they are impersonating but as image workers. With *Divine* it is different: their models are not portrayed as consumers; instead, they offer chocolate to the Western consumer acting as geographically and culturally located producers who are by their work incorporated in their product and identified with it by racial stereotype – *Divine* remains within the framework of selling authenticity, only this time it is sexed-up authenticity. Their ads swirl around at the margins of a vortex of colonial racist and sexist imagination at whose centre are the various European fantasies about the ‘*Vénus noire*’ (Nederveen Pieterse, 1992: 181ff.) – using chocolate for the symbolic link between Africanness, blackness and erotic pleasure. Supported

by the brand name and the heart in its logo, the Divine ads combine into a construction of a contemporary African Venus exposed to European longings and desires. Whilst stepping away from charity-inspired patronage and from the post-colonial consumption of authenticity, then, Divine simultaneously walks into the open trap put up by the colonial history of chocolate advertising.

Having said this, it has to be acknowledged that these images are, of course, a far cry from both the levels of sexualization of comparable contemporary and of racism of comparable colonial advertisements. Actually, there is a peculiar restraint about these images; a sense of embarrassment. The teasing posture (which according to its press release were initially intended to come with teasing questions like 'Are you craving a better world, or just another piece?') of these amateur models is controlled by shame. On the one hand this only adds to the stereotype by continuing the ideologem of the 'innocent sanctity of childhood' (Littler 2005: 236) that is ascribed to Africa as a 'young continent', combining with the persistent construction of the African as 'natural' as '[e]ven today Africa's cities and city-dwellers tend to remain invisible in the mainstream western imagery of Africa, which prefers scenes in the bush, or the lone baobab tree against an empty sky with the occasional savage in picturesque outfit' (Nederveen Pieterse, 1992: 36).

Yet this embarrassment or shame communicates something else as well. It is not just the shame of teenage girls posing in front of an internationally renowned fashion photographer to feature in a high profile advertising campaign: it is our

own embarrassment as we look at those images. I would contend that it is our collective bad conscience we are being confronted with; with our role, in a sense, still being colonialists (and this shame is a good thing, as Sartre remarked in his preface to Fanon's (1961) *Les Damnés de la terre*) even if we count ourselves among the enlightened ethical consumers disentangling ourselves from the ongoing legacy of colonial relations of production and exchange. Looking at these images is laden with shame in the sense of exposing the nudity of the state of respite (*en sursis*), of being both 'no longer' and 'not yet' (Sartre, 1949: 349): These images expose our 'not yet' being beyond the colonialist mentality which is embarrassing precisely because we are 'no longer' colonialists either. For a colonialist there would not be any reason to be embarrassed, for someone beyond colonialism there would be only astonishment, or repulsion – but not the feeling of being affected, incriminated by one's gaze.

In his *Prospero and Caliban*, O. Mannoni (1956: 18) outlines the 'colonial situation' in the language of the colonialist:

'a colonial situation is created, so to speak, the very instant a white man, even if he is alone, appears in the midst of a tribe, even if it is independent, so long as he is thought to be rich or powerful, or merely immune to the local forces of magic, and so long as he derives from his position, even though in his most secret self, a feeling of his own superiority.'

The Divine ads emerge from just one such situation. That it was 'an all-female team who travelled to Ghana to recruit and shoot the girls starring in the ads' does not alter this,⁴ neither does the fact that they did not move among a 'tribe' but an independent co-operative. Like the models in the Traidcraft catalogue, they act as representatives of the governing world consumer stewardship. However good their intentions, a photo shoot remains a highly power infused setting in itself: We are confronted with 'white on black images of Africa and Blacks in Western popular culture' (Nederven Pieterse, 1992)

Conclusion

As the anti-colonial struggles have been less successful than Fanon (1961) expected we still have grounds for shame when the colonial situation is re-created in our consumption of the exotic. Fair Trade tries to dispose of this colonial legacy, bury it in truly respectful trade relations among equal partners. This disposal is incomplete and – given the current distribution of power and resources – cannot be otherwise. As unfinished burial this leads to an uncanny return of the supposedly dead, one ghost among the many that haunt us in our consumption practices (Hetherington 2004: 170). Colonialism urgently needs a second and final burial. And to call one is not in the power of the consumer alone: It is our consumer sovereignty that is the constitutive power in the emerging global consumer democracy (Fridell, 2003: 7) – and where alternative trade organizations try to even out this imbalance by giving producer

organizations a say in the determination of standards (Raynolds 2000), this remains a concession that can be withdrawn at any time. Until a second burial is brought about, the question remains 'how we can *account* for or are held *accountable* by that which we have tried to dispose of but have left unfinished.' (Hetherington 2004: 163) As Littler (2005) urges, there is a need for reflection beyond practices of consumption – and it seems that the gatekeepers of Fair Trade produce currently lack the necessary 'relative capacity for reflexivity' (2005: 228) as the humanitarian need to sell tends to blur the vision for the seemingly minor, because seemingly only symbolic, problems of ethicality (Wright, 2004; Davies and Crane, 2003).

However, *without* the practice of Fair Trade, such a ghost would have remained invisible. Fair Trade is not ethically 'disproved' because it cannot possibly live up to the ethical standards it arrives at by taking seriously the morality that is implied by our everyday practice under capitalism. Fair Trade bears evidence against the moral power of capitalism, and demonstrates, in its failure, that it is but one step in the right direction, a step that has to be followed by further steps institutionalising conditions for truly fair interaction between all inhabitants of the planet by at least establishing an embedded world market that matches the embedded national and continental markets of North America, Europe and Japan. This, and nothing short of it, would enable the fulfilment of the moral aspirations of the Fair Trade movement.

But even this would fall dreadfully short of what many campaigners would envisage as a truly just world. It would only mean the reduction of maldistribution and misrecognition that we currently see in the relations between First and Third World to the artificially contained level within First World capitalism. Here too, despite everyday experience and assumptions, surplus value based accumulation thwarts the implicit promise of distribution according to productive contribution - but that is another story (cf. Varul, 2005b).

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image 1, from the Traidcraft Spring 2006 catalogue, courtesy to Traidcraft plc



image 2 from the Traidcraft Spring 2006 catalogue, courtesy of Traidcraft plc, photograph by Shailan Parker

The caption reads ' "Thanks to selling through Traidcraft, I can educate my children", Dariya, embroidery worker – Geeta Kala Kendra (GKK), India.' GKK produces the trousers worn by the model in image 1



image 3, from the Traidcraft Spring 2006 catalogue, courtesy to Traidcraft plc.
Both items (passport wallet and coin purse) are produced by the Bhopal Rehabilitation Centre, India.



images 4 and 5, Client: Divine Chocolate, Agency: St Lukes, Photographer: Freddie Helwig

¹ Sandino and Che used to feature quite a lot on coffee packaging in the 1980s and the 'internationalist solidarity' style still informs, e.g., some of the aesthetics applied by *Cafédirect*

² Indeed, as Dolan (2005) shows, there is an uncanny continuity between colonialist benevolence and present day ethical consumerism.

³ The colonial (and particularly Black African) servant woman has, in the Victorian era, provided a foil for the emergent white female domesticity. Once the latter had been firmly established, the foil was no longer needed yet, as Mehaffy (1997: 158f.) argues, it has not vanished but still ‘undergirds’ contemporary advertising. That it should resurface in Fair Trade advertising might be surprising and particularly unsettling. One reason may be that the de-racialization of the consumer and the statement of equality between producers and consumers undermines the domesticity constructed on the racist undergirdings, calling for a replacement of the racial Other by a cultural/ethnic Other.

⁴ Indeed, one could say that this assertion is an attempt to defuse the rather obvious use of African female “sex appeal” to get the attention of a European audience by implying that women could not possibly produce images that are sexist.