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**fair trade and critical research: what role for academic comment?**

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In the UK, fair trade has been around for at least thirty years now - but it was only in the late 1990s that it became an object for academic reflection. And it was only in the 2000s that there emerged a field of social sciences research on fair trade (mainly in human geography, marketing, and sociology).

Of course, in terms of market share, fair trade only became much noticeable during this decade.

But also, at the time fairtrade began to develop, the social sciences were just beginning to discover that we have become a consumer society. So before we could think of looking at this strange phenomenon that seems to contradict the common wisdom about the contemporary consuming self - we had to come up with that common wisdom in the first place.

Once that task was more or less accomplished (i.e. by the mid 1990s) ethical consumption became increasingly interesting:

A practice that is both based on consumer action and challenges consumer culture as responsible for global poverty - fair trade as a paradoxical case of anti-consumerist consumption, or as the slogan went: a case of "acting in the market against the market".

**Celebration**

For academics critical of neo-liberal consumerism the natural first reaction was to celebrate this critical practice. This new and rapidly growing grass roots movement seemed to give the lie to common assumptions about the egoistic/individualistic/hedonistic

consumer who seemed to have become the dominant social type from the 1980s onwards. In critical consumption, as Roberta Sassatelli more recently put it,

'[t]hemes prevalently associated with the promotion of consumption as a legitimated sphere of action per se - "taste", "good taste", "pleasure", "fantasy", "comfort", "distinction", "happiness", "refinement", and so on - are substituted by themes prevalently associated with the definition of a democratic public sphere and production. [...] They often resort to a vocabulary which draws either on social and political activism (to purchase is to "vote", to "protest", "make yourself heard", "change the world", "help the community", "mobilize for a better future", and so on) or on production (to purchase here becomes "work you do for the community", "effort done for yourself and the other", "creative", "productive", and so on).' (Sassatelli, 2006: 231f.)

Two critiques, in particular, have been identified by academic observers as embodied in the fair trade movement.

First of all (and quite obviously) a critique of the unequal exchange between agricultural and artisan producers in the Third World and First-World consumers - and second (less obviously maybe) a critique of alienation.

The first one is a pretty straightforward critique of economic injustice. From Michael Barratt Brown's 1993 book "Fair Trade" to Alex Nicholls' and Charlotte Opal's 2004 book of the same title, this is the central promise. As Barratt Brown put it, fair trade is

'a system of trade in which the partners seek deliberately to establish a more equal basis of exchange between the First and the Third Worlds.' (Brown 1993: 156)

The way that fairtrade does that is by guaranteeing a minimum price (to safeguard basic needs) and also by providing a small premium to the producer community to support broader development.

In both works cited the practical critique and academic reflection converge - partly because the authors are equally involved in academia and practice (Brown was chair of TWIN Trading and before that university tutor in economics - Nicholls lectures social entrepreneurship at the Saïd Business School, Oxford and his co-author Opal is New Products Manager at Transfair USA). But there was also a range of academic papers that discussed fairtrade under the assumption that the justice/equality impact can be taken as a given.

What fascinates these authors is the idea that we can reverse the damage done by global capitalism by using the systems and networks set up by... global capitalism. As Sarah Whatmore and Lorraine Thorne point out :

'The stock exchange, customs officials, and banking clerks are all actants of the hybrid network of fair trade, so too are their computers, telephones, and fax machines. Just as there are coincident actants and spaces between fair trade and commercial coffee networks, so too is there a coincident mode of ordering - that of enterprise - pragmatic, opportunistic, and canny.' (Whatmore/Thorne 1997: 297)

Of course - coming from both critical academics and critical activists, from the beginning the celebration of fair trade has been qualified by a critical reflection on its scope. Nobody claimed that fairtrade can, on its own, be the solution to global injustice and poverty. But it was seen as a major step in that direction.

The second object of academic celebration in fair trade is often seen as conducive to such political change, bringing about a politicisation of consumption in which consumers become citizens again, overcome their individualistic hedonism and challenge the atomisation of the capitalist self.

One of the most persistent legacies of Marxist thinking in academic discourse is the theory of the commodity fetish. By this is meant the fact that our social relations no longer are recognisable as relations between human beings but as relations in between commodities and money. While the relation between producer and consumer is in fact a social/human one, all we see is the relation of a thing and an amount of cash.

Fair trade, in marked contrast to the Dole bananas or Nescafé of old, tried to be as transparent as possible in accounting for the conditions of production (signalling that this commodity contains somebody's work in the first place!). This was (and still is) done mainly in the form exemplifying background stories on individual producers from around the world. This is, if you like, the pedagogical aspect of fair trade:

'In addition to seeking a fairer relationship, the aim has been to establish a more direct relationship between groups of producers and consumers in the two worlds and a greater understanding among consumers of the need of producers for support for their independent development.' (Brown 1993: 156)

Ian Hudson and Mark Hudson therefore attest fair trade the potential to crack open the commodity fetish. They speak of a

'potentially crucial educational role' that the alternative trade movement could play in 'getting people to focus their attention beyond the commodity on the social and the environmental conditions in which it was produced'. In doing so 'alternative trade could encourage people to identify less as consumers and more as political actors.' (Hudson/Hudson 2003: 421f.)

Similarly - arguing from a different theoretical background, Whatmore and Thorne speak of the connectivity that is established by fair trade. For them the main difference between mainstream and alternative trade is

'how they strengthen relationships amongst formerly "passive" actants in commercial networks - the producers and consumers - through a mode of ordering of connectivity which works for non-hierarchical relationships framed by "fairness".'

(Whatmore/Thorne 1997: 301)

Note how here the material benefits for producers, the fairness of fair trade, is shifted into the background while the humanisation and de-fetishisation of the commercial relationship takes centre stage. This responds more to the critique of alienation than to that of injustice - speaking to a hope that we may begin to overcome (our own) alienation through alternative trading networks. A hope that informs Nicholas J. Gould's auto-ethnographic account of his family's use of fair trade goods :

'Looking at the picture of Mario Fernandez and reading of the transformation in his family makes me feel very good indeed about the experience of coffee making and drinking. Our family, with all its privileges, is connected to Mario's by what Cova terms "linking value". Through partaking in Fair Trade our family is truly part of a "global village" that does retain a belief in fair exchange as the basis for community. Having met in person producers like Mario, I wonder if they fully realize what they are doing for us in terms of joy and confirming our own humanity.' (Gould 2003: 343)

## **Critical Perspectives**

### Commodification

Without doubting Gould's sincerity and good motives - I cannot help the suspicion that what is going on here is what I called "consuming the campesino" (Varul 2008). What is celebrated as de-fetishisation and de-commodification could, in the end be the very opposite of it.

While there are other potential problems that come with mainstreaming - e.g. fairtrade becoming an ethical fig leaf for otherwise pretty unethical corporations, necessitating the prevention of the fairtrade standards being watered down etc., the issue of commodification seems to be the one that is more pertinent in academic discourse. This may in part be due to the fact that the de-fetishisation potential has been played up so much.

The problem is not just that, as Hudson and Hudson themselves acknowledge, the links between producers and consumers may be less direct than hoped for - particularly as fair trade grows beyond the initial, more immediate alternative trading networks.

For Raymond Bryant and Mike Goodman, it is a case of achieving the opposite of what was intended, as

'ironically, through the very act of revealing the production-commodity-consumer relationship in its "full glory", the effect is to commodify, in turn, the ethical relationship deemed to be at the heart of fair trade - that is, small-scale farmers, producer cooperatives and "sustainably" managed second nature. 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.'

(Bryant/Goodman 2004: 359)

That is, what happens is that the image of the producer, and in the end the producers themselves, become part of a consumer experience - an accessory to yet another consumer lifestyle choice. As Caroline Wright put it:

'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)

The most problematic bit here, of course, is the continuation of a colonialist tradition of "othering" - which is precisely the sort of tradition that fair trade seeks to break.

For some radical critics this puts fair trade firmly into postcolonial commodity culture. For Josée Johnston , for example,

'"bringing the world home" as a commodity draws on a long Western tradition of Orientalism. Beneath the attractive veneer of fair trade chic is an unexplored desire to place the Other safely within ones' reach, and an extreme power differential separating core consumers from peripheral producers.' (Johnston 2002)

For Johnston, this is not just an indicator that fair trade marketing's "relative capacity of reflexivity" needs to be enhanced (as Jo Littler, 2005: 228, argues), but an indicator that the whole idea is fundamentally flawed - marred by

' three particularly troubling contradictions, or themes, that cast doubt on the counter-hegemonic potential of fair-trade discourse: 1) an unquestioned support for consumer

sovereignty; 2) support for micro-lifestyle politics over politicised, public sphere awareness; and 3) the normalisation of underdevelopment and over-consumption.' (Johnston 2002)

This verdict indicates that whether a critical perspective should (like in the case of the majority of the quoted critical research) aim for an advisory role to the fair trade movement - or simply denounce fair trade as part of the system of neo-liberal global capitalism, is very much down to the question whether what is achieved for the producers justifies the involvement in consumer capitalism and the deployment of its techniques.

### Impact

The actual impact of fair trade where it matters most: the producer communities it is supposed to provide with a better deal, is much less the object of critical academic scrutiny.

I will highlight two very different examples: a report by the Adam Smith Institute called "Unfair Trade" - and the work of the social anthropologist Amanda Berlan, mainly on cocoa production in Ghana.

The Adam Smith Institute Report by Marc Sidwell takes, in a way, the exact opposite position of Josée Johnston's critique. While Johnston claims that fair trade impedes development because it buys into neo-liberal ideologies of free market choice, Sidwell believes fair trade, by distorting the free market, robs the poor of opportunities to work their way out of poverty - while a free market would enable them to obtain the maximum reward for their work. Imposing a fixed floor price for a selection of producers, he argues, disincentivises efficiency and also acts as a subsidy that discriminates against non-fair-trade producers and especially non-landowning agricultural labourers.

This report was swiftly exposed as fundamentally flawed. Alastair Smith (2008) showed up some outright false claims - for example, Sidwell claims that fair trade rules only apply to land-owning farmers, but not to hired workers (Sidwell 2008: 15f.), which is simply not true (Smith 2008: 21).

More importantly however, the wider criticism is based on economic modelling and is not born out by empirical research. As Smith writes:

'... examining the evidence which Sidwell uses to derive this conclusion reveals that neither of the cited sources have been peer reviewed (being a blog and the transcript of a speech delivered in a church hall) or reference empirical evidence. Instead, both are reiterations of simple economic theory (in that they fail to account for the complexity of the real world), a point that is even acknowledged by the author of the second source.' (Smith 2008: 25)

Alastair Smith then goes on to dismantle the economic model in detail - if you want to judge for yourself you will find the links to both reports on my blog. He does not claim that all is well with fair trade - but that an informed judgement must be research-based. An essential lesson therefore is that there is indeed the need for more high-quality empirical research to ensure that neither celebration nor critique of fair trade are based on mere hearsay and speculation.

Research such as that by Amanda Berlan.

Her findings do indeed contradict some of the more enthusiastic fair trade marketing stories which present an image of transformation from the most abject poverty to happiness, crediting fair trade not only with a secure income, but also water supply, education for the children etc. The story she found on the ground, however, is not one of helpless African farmers being saved by the generosity of Western consumers. For example, the ability of Ghanaian cocoa producers to play the system of government-licensed buying companies to their advantage (fair trade and non-fair-trade alike) is under-estimated and the difference in income from selling to the fair trade co-operative Kuapa Kokoo and conventional buyers is less than one would expect.

'The fact that individual farmers selling to Kuapa Kokoo do not receive a significantly higher price is contrary to what some Fair trade organisations assert. The small increment which farmers receive is certainly not enough to pay for

healthcare and medical bills, as is often claimed.' (Berlan 2008: 177)

(this is partly due to the fact that back then Kuapa Kokoo only sold three percent of their beans into the fairtrade market)

So far, this seems to back up polemics against fair trade. But the crucial difference is that critical research does not produce simplistic stories but an adequate picture of what is a very complex reality.

Miracle stories cannot be confirmed, but the fact remains that the fair trade cooperative Kuapa Kokoo was and is, in comparison to the competing licensed buying companies, 'an effective farmer organisation' - an organisation that offers much more than just the prospect of a slightly higher income.

Based on extensive field work - participant observations as well as interviews stretching over a period of more than two years - Berlan concludes:

'The provision of loans, gender equality and participatory democracy are working successfully and they matter considerably to the local communities, as reflected in the substantial growth of Kuapa Kokoo in recent years.' (Berlan 2008: 179)

Instead of giving a straightforward answer to the question: "fair trade: is it good or bad" such research highlights both weaknesses and strengths in a way that not only gives us a nuanced picture of a multi-faceted reality - but also enables practitioners to identify problems and act on them (i.e.: is genuinely useful).

By doing this not only does such research serve a better purpose than wholesale rejections based on theory and speculation but also than celebrations that uncritically accept the picture that is presented in fair trade promotion. This not only because it is always better to have an adequate assessment of the reality on the ground if one wants to continue improving one's practices - but also because the confirmation of positive effects coming from such research have far greater legitimacy and credibility.

The question now is: why bother? Does critical research have any effect at all?

### **Communication**

Critical research can only have an effect when it is heard by those it is directed at.

As academics we normally publish our results in academic journals or books and then leave it at that. Even if some practitioner should bother reading any of those, they are normally not really written to speak them but rather to impress an academic audience with their sophistication, novelty, etc. Also, Fair trade practitioners will have little time for research that does not add substantively to what they can find out for themselves. Armchair evaluations will not do here.

At a recent seminar here in Exeter Iain Davies who lectures marketing at the University of Bath pointed out that much research on fair trade is not only poor quality and often not very relevant to fair trade organisations - due to the long publication lead times it is often out of date by years. One thing we can do about this - he suggested - is make sure we communicate our results back directly to the researched organisations (i.e. end what he calls a "slash-and-burn" culture), and disseminate our results in more accessible ways (through blogs and websites - such as the newly established FairnessUK network).

Direct exchange, too, is not only desirable but essential. From a sociologist's point of view it is a mere truism that mutual understanding in an intercultural settings can only benefit from face-to-face conversations in which those involved immediately realise when they appear not to make themselves understood, in which you can immediately clarify and ask for clarification. I say: intercultural situation as this is what it is: even if academics working on fairtrade and practitioners often have similar backgrounds and a history of involvement in a certain style of politics.

As Iain Davies pointed out: researchers are often taken aback when they discover that they are dealing not so much with political activists but with business people, marketeers who have to operate under the imperative to make the businesses they run not only ethical - but also profitable in order to keep them going.

I have mentioned our seminar series - I should also mention the ESRC-funded Knowledge Transfer Workshop last spring in Cardiff in which a number of academic researchers and key practitioners met to assess the implications of current research and gauge the need for further research. So this process has already started and in order to make academic research more than an exercise to raise funds for our departments and make them look good in the next research assessment, but make research relevant, such exchanges and networks need to be carefully maintained.

Much of the initiative here, it has to be said, does not come from academics seeking to be relevant (although this is increasingly the case) but from the fair trade organisations themselves. The Fairtrade Foundation have commissioned the NRI to produce a meta study looking at published evidence of impacts of fairtrade. At our Exeter seminar the Fairtrade Foundations Head of Producer Research and Impact Nita Pillai has given an overview and made it very clear that the FTF is not just after a vindication of the Fairtrade Mark, but also very keen on identifying fields for improvement.

In this vein they also commission original research, such as the current IDS study on the banana sector (reacting to the fact that the vast majority of published research so far is on a single product: coffee).

Another good example is David Phillips' PhD project on sugar production in Malawi which has been co-supervised by the University of Newcastle and Traidcraft as an ESRC CASE studentship. At our seminar he reported that on the one hand this was a bit of a balancing act between institutional involvement and independent perspective (a balancing act that, as Iain Davies pointed out, can easily go wrong), but in the end produced research that benefited both from privileged access to the field and organisational support and the rigour of academic research - enabling a contribution both

to social scientific knowledge and the relevance of such knowledge to practice.

Fair trade organisations are taking a risk here - because the research is independent it can always expose failures that might damage the public image of fair trade and supply sceptics with excuses to continue not buying fair trade. But it is precisely this risk that ensures that these organisations do not become complacent - and it is this risk that provides the legitimacy of its findings and hence a stronger justification if the results show positive effects.

I should point out that accountability through this is increased not only on the side of the practitioners - academics will have to expect an occasional

"how do you mean that?",

"what kind of research is that assessment based on?", "how do you know?" ... and also:

"how is this relevant to us?"

Which leads me to the last part of my talk: What kind of normative background can we fall back on when contributing critical comment?

### **A Basis for Critique?**

On the level of impact studies this might be less of an issue: while there is much complexity in terms of what constitutes impact (from financial over political to symbolical), how causes and effects can be attributed etc. - the general line seems to be clear: achieve as much as possible for the producers. While the question here is

whether fair trade can achieve higher income, a more democratic community structure, gender empowerment etc. - the desirability of those aims seems beyond dispute.

On the level of the commodification critique, the assessment of advertising and promotion, producer stories etc. this is much less clear.

For example: In talks on fairtrade marketing I often highlight the fact that while consumers are portrayed as wealthy cosmopolitans who are not accountable for what they have and where they are - producers are often portrayed as justifying their income by pointing out their hard work, are position where they have to be grateful, and also enacting a fixed image of the distant other (an ethnically often also racially fixed image). A very common reaction to this is:

"If this helps increasing sales, and thereby provides deprived producers with a better income, healthcare, education for their children - is that not a price we have to pay."

What can I say?

Do I take a neo-Marxist (or rather neo-Kantian) anti-commodification stance, which Jeremy Gilbert (2008: 562) recently summed up succinctly:

'What is most objectionable about neo-liberalism [...] is its violent imposition of the buyer/seller paradigm onto every possible set of social relationships.'

Would you agree?

Commodification of social relations really worse than poverty? (cf. also Miller 2001). The fact that we tend to commercialise love in consumer fests such as Valentine's Day or Christmas as bad as the environmental impact of all this?

I would argue that this form of critique not only lacks plausibility and hence relevance - it's outright dangerous. It gives a

philosophical credibility to arguments such as that by the above-quoted Nicholas Gould who is concerned about the preservation of the rural simplicity of the producers.

'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..." [John Updike, Brazil] is strong. Has Mario also joined the massed ranks of consumers?' (Gould 2003: 344)

But how do you argue with philosophical preferences behind statements like this? In this case we are helped by the fact that there is an immediate detrimental effect on what is more or less uncontested as a legitimate outcome: the fight against poverty and the establishment of a just, equitable exchange relation. To condemn Third World citizens to the existence of traditional anti-consumers is to severely limit the scope of what fair trade can achieve and hence is intrinsically unfair. It counteracts mainstreaming and seeks to prolong a situation in which, as Mark Leclair noted some time ago:

'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)

But this is not to say that we should switch to a crude utilitarianism or consequentialism and regard everything that can be said to benefit the producers as justifying any marketing message or imagery. Like Berlan ( 2008: \_\_\_) I have welcomed Divine's move away from the miracle-story style producer based advertising - but I am still extremely critical of the way it turned out as a case of borderline commodity racism (Varul 2008: 669ff.).

But what standards should we apply - where can we get a reasonably plausible and committing normative background from? It should be something that is plausible to practitioners as underpinning fair trade (and hence something they should care for) - but as Clive Barnett, Phillip Cafaro and Terry Newholm (2005) have shown, there

are several possible philosophical justifications for fair trade. We are citizens of a consumer society and therefore spoilt for choice... which can be a problem.

It has been claimed that in a culture that puts individual expression over commitment to shared values - a culture of - as moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre called it - "emotivism", there "seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement.'  
(MacIntyre 1981: 6)

There are several grand attempts to get round this in a rationalistic way - such as Habermas' discourse ethics or John Rawls' suggestion to go back to a hypothetical original contract signed under a veil of ignorance. Attempts that have relatively little practical use: I am not aware of any major instances where they were deployed successfully in the real world.

For that reason I am with Michael Walzer and his insistence that

'[e]ven if they are committed to impartiality, the question most likely to arise in the minds of the members of a political community is not, What would rational individuals choose under universalizing conditions of such-and-such a sort? But rather, What would individuals like us choose, who are situated as we are, who share a culture and are determined to go on sharing it? And this is a question that is readily transformed into, What choices have we already made in the course of our common life? What understandings do we really share?' (Walzer 1983: 5)

We have such a culture: it's consumer capitalism. This may surprise you, but if there is a reason for the compelling plausibility of fair trade as equitable commerce (the French translation is, in fact, commerce équitable) - uniting Christians, neo-Marxists, social-liberals - it is highly unlikely that these ideologies, philosophies, theologies just accidentally converge on the desirability of a certain form of market exchange (which in fact, in different ways, does not really square with their fundamental assumptions).

So I am quite seriously claiming that the concept of fairness which is activated in fair trade is rooted in everyday practices in contemporary market societies. Indeed, one could say that ethical consumers act, as Kozinets and Handelman (1998: 478) called it, on 'a desperate urge to reclaim capitalism, to salvage morality from it' or as Nicholls and Opal (2004: 31) put it, make 'the free trade system work the way it is supposed to'. They demand the realisation of the promise of just (meritocratic) distribution - a promise that pervades capitalist societies (Miller 1999: 61ff.). Our everyday experience and expectation is to get out of the market roughly what we put into it (particularly as we are guided by what Michael Lerner (1980) described as our inherent "belief in a just world").

The practical equations we perform in the market do not only perform a redistributive function, but also communicate what is worth what - and crucially: who is worth what:

'... whenever, by an exchange, we equate as values our different products, by that very act, we also equate, as human labour, the different kinds of labour expended upon them. We are not aware of this, nevertheless we do it.' (Marx 1996: 84f.)

On the one hand this signals relative worth - but when you stretch it too far it gives rise to a strong sense of injustice. And because it affects that existential self-expression that is work, it then also conveys a humiliating sense of misrecognition.

Of course, we all know that the processes of a capitalist economy constantly lead into inequalities and inequities that mock that ethics of exchange (even with judgements and prejudices about skill accounted for.) But not only fall we back on the idea that we should be exchanging roughly equal amounts of work - we experience it as humiliation if our fair day's work does not buy us the product of somebody else's day. The injustice Barratt Brown describes therefore constitutes a collective act of contempt on a massive scale:

'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.'  
(Brown 1993: 3)

Hence, when we portray fair trade producers as a) working extremely hard and b) as being able to afford to cater for their basic needs (food, housing, education) - we are making a statement about their relative worth in comparison to ourselves. Crucially, there is a recognition aspect involved here - and recognition is what distinguishes fair trade from charity: "trade not aid". It is not about giving, but about paying up for the work that's in our coffee cup - just as we expect employers back home to pay their workers an adequate wage. Marie-Christine Renard (1999: 496) therefore correctly expresses the aim of fair trade in terms of the old labour slogan of fair pay - which is imperative even if the determination of what constitutes a fair price is notoriously difficult (Renard 1999: 497).

If self esteem is, as so-called "intangible impact", is an important benefit of fair trade (and there is strong evidence that this is the case - as Nelson and Pound found in their study for the NRI) - then marketing that runs counter to fair trade's recognition agenda cannot be a mere side issue. In addition, as Caroline Wright and Gilma Madrid (2007) found, a lack of recognition has real implications in terms of material distribution.

Recognition through trade works precisely because we do not intend it to be recognition, because the whole thing is based on selfish motives - as Adam Smith famously said:

"It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard for their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity, but to their selflove, and never talk to them of our own necessities, but of their advantages."

And in reverse, we don't buy from the baker because we want to support her - we may not even like her - we buy from her because we like her bread. So we buy from her not because she needs, not because she is needy but because she is needed. And to confirm to someone in that way that they are needed is a very strong message of recognition - an expression of esteem. Esteem that then can be realised by translating the money received into the products of yet

somebody else - precisely by joining the "massed ranks of consumers"!

This is not possible as long as the fair trade price does not exceed the satisfaction of basic needs. As for example Sarah Lyon observed in a Guatemalan cooperative 'earnings enabled them to maintain their families, but not necessarily go get ahead.' (2006: 458). From a recognition-in-marketing perspective the prime objective here converges with the material interest of the producers - not being linked up, acquainted with, unveiled to the Northern consumers, but earning enough money to consume back on them:

'When asked to name the benefits of co-operative membership, only three of the 53 surveyed members named relationships with foreign consumers or coffee roasters. Instead, interviewed co-operative members primarily understood fair trade as a market transaction paying slightly higher prices than conventional coffee markets.' (Lyon 2006: 458)

If we decide to engage in a project of commercial recognition, looking for personal links, removing the veil etc. is counterproductive because the mediation of recognition through the product is crucial - only if the consumer is mainly motivated by desire rather than solidarity is the message of recognition credible.

Therefore the commercialisation of fair trade promotion is to be welcomed on ethical grounds.

First of all to increase sales and therefore increase income - and secondly to relieve the producers of the expectation that they justify their income by exposing how hard-working-yet-relatively-poor (but still grateful) they are while we consumers don't need to justify our income that allows us to buy luxuries like 100% Arabica coffees

In the case of the provocative and slightly risqué adverts for Divine chocolate (the ones featuring young female members of the Kuapa Kokoo cooperative and slogans like: "Serious Chocolate Appeal" and "Equality Treat") this went, I think, horribly wrong.

But the mistake was not too much commercialism, but too little. The featured women fall victim to borderline racist and sexist commodification because they are not portrayed as consumers to identify with, but still as producers (and they are not themselves desiring the chocolate featured but offering them to the desiring audience) They are identified with their product (and our colonial legacy means that there is a high likelihood for racism when identifying African women with chocolate).

You could call my suggestion to fall back on the implicit exchange morality of consumer capitalism "affirmative of the neo-liberal political/economic system" that makes that morality plausible. But on the other hand: this morality may emerge from capitalist everyday practices - but it puts a great question mark behind the outcomes of those practices. It is basic dialectics that the not-yet-existent, the system-transcendent must somehow emerge from what is now. It can be argued that such a morality lends itself for a much broader critique of consumer capitalism as a whole (Varul 2010)

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Update 9th November 2009

there was a question after the talk regarding the issue of fair trade schools along the lines: is it justifiable at all that schools, as public institutions, favour one business model over others or is that not in breach of UK or EU competition laws. i answered that i actually do not know very much about this, but there's a discussion going on over at fairnessUK.

Alastair Smith (the researcher who wrote that devastating report on the Adam-Smith-Institute Report...) has another report on this issue.

[http://www.brass.cf.ac.uk/uploads/Creative\\_Public\\_Procurement.pdf](http://www.brass.cf.ac.uk/uploads/Creative_Public_Procurement.pdf)

He argues that the public duty to be cost-efficient in procurment (i.e. buy at the lowest possible price so as to get the most for taxpayer's money) is to be balanced against public goals such as those formulated in the Agenda 21 for sustainability... worth a read

Update 12th January 2010

a full report of the ESRC seminar "Fair Trade under Academic Scrutiny - What Can Critical Research Be Good for" is now available here. <http://people.exeter.ac.uk/mzv201/seminar1.pdf>