What Can Sociology Say About FairTrade? : Class, Reflexivity and Ethical Consumption

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ABSTRACT
This article critically considers the 'fit' between FairTrade consumption and conceptualizations of the reflexive project of selfhood. By outlining the ways in which FairTrade products are marketed, we argue that a *particular* and *partial* reflexivity is invoked and mobilized. Following from recent class debates which apply a Bourdieusian analysis to explore the operations of everyday class distinctions, we explore what such an analysis can offer to the project of critically mapping out the dynamics of this particular reflexivity and ethical consumption. However, FairTrade's emphasis on 'just' consumption and invocation of a deserving farmer/worker allows some scope for problematization here too. By turning to an emerging literature on the 'moral economy' we reach past the homogenizing tendency in some 'new' class analyses to suggest possibilities both for a psychosocial imagining of ethical consumption and for fleshing out the conceptualization of a 'situated reflexivity' demanded by recent social theory.

KEY WORDS
class / ethical consumption / FairTrade / psychosocial / reflexivity

> As an individual I'm able to help tackle the problem of international poverty – all it takes is a conscious decision to buy products with the FairTrade Mark. (FairTrade Foundation, 2006)

> Robin Hood comes to town, latté in hand. (Goodman, 2004: 896)

Introduction

This article is sparked by our fascination for a contemporary social phenomenon – the rise and rise of FairTrade. The sale of FairTrade produce has enjoyed remarkable growth in Europe and North America in recent years. In the UK, FairTrade sales topped £493m in 2007; a substantial year-on-year increase from £16.7m in 1997. Further, 18 per cent of the UK roast and ground coffee market is now FairTrade certified as is 3 per cent of overall coffee sales. Globally, FairTrade certified products surpassed €1 billion in 2005, a 37 per cent increase on the previous year. Market research carried out by Mori has seen the percentage of the population able to identify the FairTrade mark rise from 19 per cent in 2001 to 57 per cent in 2005. There are now 242 UK towns and 51 UK universities boasting 'FairTrade status' in recognition of their 'substantial commitment to the promotion and uptake of FairTrade food' (FairTrade Foundation, 2008).

Yet, to date, sociology has had surprisingly little to say about what we consider to be an important consumer trend with significant cultural and social antecedents; analysis has largely been left to business studies, consumer studies and political geography (e.g. Cowe and Williams, 2000; Goodman, 2004; Micheletti, 2003). There are many possible ways that sociological interest could be extended to FairTrade and ethical initiatives of its ilk. As a starting point our analysis is shaped by two prevailing sociological observations of late modernity: that the self is necessarily and incessantly engaged in its own reflexive production (Giddens, 1991); and that, increasingly, consumption emerges as the privileged site for this identity work (Billig, 1999). We are thus drawn to FairTrade's ambitions for 'just' consumption, which appears to depend on the existence of reflexive, concerned and knowing consumers. As such, we see FairTrade as fertile territory to explore the dynamic intersections of reflexivity, ethics, consumption and identity.

After introducing the phenomenon of FairTrade, we critically consider the 'fit' between FairTrade consumption and conceptualizations of the reflexive project of selfhood. By outlining the ways in which FairTrade products are marketed, we explore a prevailing tendency to present reflexivity as context transcendent, and argue that a *particular* and *partial* reflexivity is invoked and mobilized. Following from recent class debates that apply a Bourdieusian analysis to explore the operations of everyday class distinctions, we explore what such an analysis can offer to the project of critically mapping out the dynamics of whatever version of reflexivity might be involved in ethical consumption. We then turn to an emerging literature on suffering, moral worth and identification to reach past the homogenizing tendency in some 'new' class analyses. Finally, we outline a psychosocial conceptualization of ethical consumption and consider its implications for sociological accounts of reflexive selfhood.

What is FairTrade?

FairTrade is a labelling initiative that attempts to intervene in the ordering of the matrix of global capitalism whilst firmly embedded in it. It is argued by its

advocates to have 'emerged as the most important market-based mechanism to improve the lives of producers in developing countries' (Nicholls and Opal, 2005: 4–5). It is a primary example of ethical consumption, which can be broadly defined as: 'any practice of consumption in which explicitly registering commitment towards distant or absent others is an important dimension of the meaning of activity to the actors involved' (Barnett et al., 2005: 29). FairTrade is just one of a number of contemporary manifestations of ethical consumption – from animal welfare to sustainable tourism – and as a social practice it has a long history. People have long boycotted produce from a particular country (e.g. South Africa) or corporation (e.g. Nestlé), for example, as a way of expressing contempt for the perceived immorality of policies and/or practices. 'Buycotting' – the purchase of products to express one's commitment to a moral cause (Micheletti, 2003) – is also a well-established practice, and notable examples include the history of the co-operative movement (Lang and Gabriel, 2005) and the activity of the Empire Marketing Board (Constantine, 1986).

FairTrade has a complex history, but Nicholls and Opal (2005) identify three distinct waves. The first refers to post-Second World War community action projects, which, through select purchasing, aimed to aid the economic recovery of Eastern European Countries. The second wave saw these groups developing Alternative Trading Organizations (ATOs) as they forged more official trading links between producers and retailers, and the third wave marked the ways ATOs developed their own brands (such as Cafédirect) and trading niches. We identify a fourth wave in the evolution of FairTrade: one that is characterized by a mainstreaming of FairTrade products, involving increased everyday recognition and availability. Today, in addition to FairTrade towns and workplaces, FairTrade is actively promoted in major supermarkets, with Tesco and others developing their own FairTrade brands.

This current stage still contains many of the features of earlier waves: it relies on grass roots activists for its expansion (Lang and Gabriel, 2005); produce is still commonly sold through independent and 'alternative' trading companies; and distinct branding and niche marketing continue to mark FairTrade's progress. Consumer activism has been an important part of our engagement with market forces since at least the beginning of the modern form of the co-operative movement in Rochdale in 1844 (Lang and Gabriel, 2005: 41). However, in mainstreaming FairTrade there is a more persistent and explicit attempt to equate consumption with activism (Barnett et al., 2005: 30), and more opportunity to do so. Sustained engagement in ethical consumption across a range of sites (shops, work, home, hotels, tourism, special events) and products (food, clothes, toys) becomes a real possibility. Our proposed fourth wave is distinctive because it reflects accelerated processes of globalization more broadly. These processes constitute the consolidation of a 'consumer society' in which practices of consumption become almost inescapable forms of identification, including ethical consumption (Billig, 1999; Harrison et al., 2005). We argue that this fourth wave of FairTrade, as a current manifestation of ethical consumption, is of sociological interest because it necessarily involves debates about the nature of globalization, individualization and reflexivity; all

of which are articulated for the 'consumer' in terms of choice (Giddens, 1991; Lang and Gabriel, 2005; Tomlinson, 1999).

FairTrade works by guaranteeing farmers a 'fair' price for their produce, essentially isolating FairTrade produce from the crippling fluctuations of conventional global markets. At the consumption end, FairTrade labelling communicates these ethical principles to wider audiences. More specifically, for a particular product to achieve the FairTrade label, its producers must comply with a number of objectives. These objectives are matched by a commitment to a fairer stake for the producer in the supply chain. Key practices include agreed minimum prices, negotiated to ensure a 'living wage' for farmers and workers; an additional 'social premium' of around 10 per cent of the cost price of goods paid to the producers – the premium is reserved for larger scale community projects (sinking wells, building schools, infrastructure etc.); farmers being obliged to form democratic cooperatives that decide upon how the premium is spent; producers being purchased from directly, cutting out the margins usually taken by the mediating links in the supply chain; and importers being required to sign long-term partnerships and provide credit to provide stability for small-scale producers (FairTrade Foundation, 2008; Nicholls and Opal, 2005).

FairTrade is thus concerned with the dynamics of the relationship between production and consumption within the global supply chain. Most of the existing literature on ethical trade, both critical and supportive, has focused on the politics of *production* (Howley, 2006). Our intention here is to initiate a critical sociological analysis of FairTrade's unique focus on 'just' *consumption*; and problematize its appeal to, and assumption of, a knowing and ethically reflexive consumer. As reflexivity is such a central concept, a first step in developing a sociological interest in FairTrade is to summarize how self-reflexivity has been conceived of in key sociological arguments, followed by a consideration of the extent to which they can help make sense of FairTrade consumption.

The Extended Reflexivity Thesis

Late modernity is, for some, characterized by a highly reflexive self inhabiting a landscape subject to the dynamics of detraditionalization, globalization, individualization and time-space distanciation (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). In the context of identity 'reflexivity' refers to the act of an individual subject directing awareness towards itself, reflecting upon its own practices, preferences and even the process of reflection itself. As a result the self is argued to become a 'reflexive project' (Giddens, 1991: 32), involving 'the strategic adoption of lifestyle options', likely to have been pulled from consumer culture, to relate to a planned 'trajectory', geared to maintaining a meaningful biographical narrative (1991: 243–4). Giddens has not been alone in indexing a supposed increase of reflexivity in the everyday task of being a self; recent social theory is punctuated with similar claims made with varying degrees of optimism (e.g. Castells, 2004; Heelas et al., 1996). We might even go as far as to state that Giddens's work reflects a general tendency

in social theory – an *extended reflexivity thesis* (Adams, 2003) – that emphasizes emerging or established reflexive capabilities in the context of social change.

Proponents of the extended reflexivity thesis claim that social bonds reach new levels of interconnectedness in the context of globalization. Giddens, for example, is keen to highlight what he refers to as 'the dialectic of the local and the global'. As well as the individual being affected by distant, centralized systems of control, new levels of relatedness mean that the modern individual also has a chance to affect those systems: 'My decision to purchase a particular item of clothing, for example, or a specific type of foodstuff, has manifold implications... [an] extraordinary, and still accelerating, connectedness between everyday decisions and global outcomes' (1994: 57–8). This is an extended reflexivity not least because reflexivity here moves beyond the immediate time-space-place locales of existence to distant and disparate others, but is also incorporating their locales into novel and complex social dynamics.

However, work on the rise of reflexivity has been greeted with a cacophony of critical voices. Briefly stated, critique has centred on the assumption of a seemingly universal, disembedded and disembodied self, which somehow uniformly transcends the cultural, material and affective parameters that were once conceptualized as the underpinnings of identity formation. What arguably gets lost is an understanding of the specific and localized ways in which reflexivity emerges from a complex interface of socially and culturally stratified contexts, dynamic interpersonal relations and psychodynamics. There is also concern that specific sociological contexts of class, gender, race, etc. lose their analytical purchase in being rendered 'zombie categories' (Beck and Willms, 2004). These contexts always underpin the way choices become reflexively known and acted upon, and the forms of reflexivity through which the self emerges and is constituted. What is demanded as a result is a more 'situated' understanding of reflexivity (e.g. Adkins, 2002; Cremin, 2005; McNay, 1999; Mestrovic, 1999; Plumridge and Thomson, 2003). The tendency to separate self-reflexivity processes demeans the complex and ongoing relationship between subjectivity, agency and social structure, particularly as expressed via consumption practices, and provides us with a caricature portrait of the individual as rational actor (Adams, 2006). It is scepticism towards the extended reflexivity thesis that informs our sociological approach to FairTrade consumption.

FairTrade, Extended Reflexivity and the Moral Economy

While sociology has been slow to interrogate the phenomenon, other disciplines have conceptualized FairTrade in ways which suggest some affinity with the extended reflexivity thesis. In terms of FairTrade, a globalized, reflexive awareness of distant 'others' is argued to invoke an increased visibility along the supply chain (Bryant and Goodman, 2004; Goodman, 2004). This is claimed to affectively enmesh the consumer and producer in a shortened and more personalized relationship (Nicholls and Opal, 2005: 168; Raynolds, 2002). It implies a more direct relation between the two 'ends'; the 'pleasure' of consumption is provided via a

shortening of the supply chain or 'linkage' between producer and consumer (Cova, 1997). Here consumption, pleasure and extended reflexivity on the part of the ethical consumer are drawn together, in a project allowing a combination of emancipatory and lifestyle aims (Giddens, 1991; Lyon, 2006), as a consequence of the kinds of social change Giddens and others have indicated. It therefore potentially inverts the long-established 'hidden' or at least obfuscated material relations of production (Billig, 1999), invoking ethical responses which champion the virtues of 'fairness'. The ethics of FairTrade consumption encourage a reflexive recognition of the unscrupulousness of 'free trade' as contributing to the basis of one's own daily privilege. Thus there is argued to be the opening up of a global reflexive space, which takes as its point of departure the 'active agency of consumers' apparent in Giddens's local/global dialectic (Micheletti, 2003: 16). The consumption of FairTrade demands a willingness to engage reflexively with the complexities of the global supply chain, either via the information provided in the packaging or on the basis of prior considerations. The 'reflexive consumer' is one who must marshal a wealth of information to embody 'a broader sense of agency in the realm of consumption choices, reflected in knowledge seeking, evaluation, and discernment' (Guthman, cited in Goodman, 2004: 895). Thus, FairTrade and ethical consumption more generally are perceived as 'involvement based on self-authored individualized narratives (self-reflexivity) … personal responsibility' and 'self-actualization' (Micheletti, 2003: 27), producing a socially recognizable 'ethical self'.

Despite the superficial cogency in applying the extended reflexivity thesis to FairTrade, its critical reception raises questions about its appropriateness as a framework on which to hang FairTrade consumption. Great care needs to be taken in unpacking the ways in which reflexivity is embedded in pre-existing cultural and social configurations, in line with the aforementioned critique. In other words, a more situated and differentiated notion of reflexivity appears to be required in approaching the meanings and motivations behind FairTrade consumption. By taking a sociological approach, we see some opportunity to realize such a conceptualization in recently emerging work on the 'moral economy' (Bryant and Goodman, 2004). The notion of moral economy is defined as the refraction of economic exchange through moral norms and sentiments (Sayer, 2002). FairTrade is claimed to inform consumers about unethical trading practices and encourage them to 'right' inequalities through ethical consumption (Goodman, 2004; Mayo, 2005). However, discontented with prevailing assumptions that seemingly universalized notions of 'fairness' and human connectivity carry their own explanatory justification, Goodman and others identify specific discursive devices which *shape* the visions of a moral economy. These devices work to isolate and frame problems of global capitalism in specific, partial and arguably limiting ways (Goodman, 2004; Larana, 2001); they also render consumption as an acceptable and appropriate solution (Howley, 2006: 48). We wish to extend these arguments and claim that FairTrade narratives contribute to a contingent and normative conceptualization and mobilization of self-reflexivity. A sociological approach thus has the potential to allow a critical engagement with the FairTrade movement, while problematizing the assumptions of the extended reflexivity thesis.

Moral economies are articulated through specific discursive imaginaries of the people and places of production, the producer–consumer nexus and, perhaps more implicitly, the act of consumption: 'it is this imaginary that attempts to rally and energize consumers to be *morally* reflexive … and literally to buy into the politics of FairTrade and alternative development' (Goodman, 2004: 896). In such accounts reflexivity is effectively argued to be embedded within particular normative discursive framings of choice, paralleling the way reflexive processes get reworked in more critical sociological readings. Consider, for example, the words of a Responsible Coffee Campaign activist:

> 'Globalization' is what's happening. At the simplest level, this means that more of what people consume comes from distant regions through complex transactions hidden from ordinary view … While most of us cannot escape participating in commodity chains, we can participate with greater or less insight and responsibility. That's a choice open to all consumers, obviously. (cited in Micheletti, 2003: 11)

The wording here may seem to benignly encourage reflexivity but more is in fact involved: there is an appropriation by assertion of what is considered to be more 'insightful' and 'responsible'; consumption is equated with participation; and the benefits of participation for 'distant regions' are assumed. Statements such as this cogently summarize normative FairTrade interpellations of reflexivity and 'choice'. The moral imperative of making the 'right' reflexive choice is further illustrated in the comments of a senior executive:

> [FairTrade is] about freedom of choice, and we are saying, by God make your choice, just make an informed choice. Understand what's going on and then make a choice. Understand what's going on, open yourself to the notion of conscience, and then make a choice. (cited in Nicholls and Opal, 2005: 31)

The successive qualifications of the basis for making the 'right' choice here indicate why it is problematic to conceive of self-reflexivity as capable of drifting free of its cultural, social and historical moorings. It also unsettles the equation of reflexivity with choice – to what extent is the 'choice' of FairTrade produce a freely decided upon outcome of reflexivity when moral imperatives are claimed as strongly as this. With the shift towards designating specific locales as 'FairTrade' (towns, businesses, universities), the unavoidable encounter with FairTrade further problematizes the salience of choice and reflexivity in consuming ethically. The concept of the moral economy in particular demonstrates not only how products are encoded as 'fair', but also how a particular relationship between the consumer and producer is constituted, via the articulation of ethical reflexive action.

Rallying Reflexivity

In FairTrade's publicity materials and in the information stamped upon their commodities, we find the 'rallying' for a moral reflexivity; messages that 'veritably shout to consumers about the socio-natural relations under which they were

produced' (Bryant and Goodman, 2004: 348), but which have as yet gained limited academic attention. By paying them a little more consideration, we hope to reiterate the poverty of the extended reflexivity thesis if used in isolation as an explanatory tool for making sense of FairTrade consumption sociologically.

Wright argues that contemporary self-constructions depend upon commodity consumption (rather than production) and asserts 'that such constructions require a habitual forgetfulness, repression even, of the social relations underpinning commodity production and exchange' (2004: 665) for the fragile pleasure of identification to be sustainable. As FairTrade to some degree makes these relations *visible*, it potentially disrupts or negates the affective-constructive dimensions of consumption; it undermines, in other words, the commodity fetishist lynchpin of the consumer capitalist psychic economy. Wright claims that the potential loss of pleasure risked by a revelation of unequal social relations is avoided by the *reconfiguration* of commodity fetishism in FairTrade representations of the production process. This is initially achieved through the particularization and personification of 'the producer'; text which highlights names, locales and specific practices; and the support of close-up images of individuals and their apparent domestic and/or working environments. Such imagery is also saturated by exoticism: sumptuous depictions of nature and close-up portraits of workers who hold the gaze of the reader. Thus a more 'authentic other' is posited in the naturalization of the producer (weathered, worn, hard-working) and their landscape (mountains, earth, crops) as bountiful and natural. Wright's content analysis is the basis for a more constructionist and critical identification of the shortening of supply chains in FairTrade production/consumption noted earlier. It is a disembedded economic relationship, which gets re-embedded through *particular* 'modes of connectivity', 'largely symbolic ones formed in the North through marketing' (Lyon, 2006: 457). The fetishistic quality of consuming FairTrade here is multiple. As Marx indicated, fetishism is not just about masking the relations of production, but also about imbuing products with a reified mystical dimension; through its particular imagining FairTrade may be deepening this 'mystical character' (Lyon, 2006: 459) or 'refetishizing' it.

The key point we want to take further from the analyses of Wright and others is that reflexivity, taste, choice and the 'project' of identity require a more complex conceptualization in relation to the FairTrade phenomenon. It is here that we would move from marketing imagery to think about the contextualized self-work of the consumer. More specifically our questions relate to why and how this incitement to reflexive practice takes hold and what wider functions it may serve – beyond uncritical notions of 'fairness'. Not least, processes of identification and recognition may rely at least partially on the concurrent recognitions of a fantasy 'other' hinted at above. Rather than being associated with perspicuous reflexivity such imagery reflects the 'strategically essentialized identities' of advertisers' representations (Lyon, 2006: 458), and in such ways encourages a specific normative 'reflexive' response. This is not just a reflexivity towards consumption practices which is simply heightened, but one which is articulated through very

particular cultural imagery. A recently emerging 'new' class analysis, drawing upon Bourdieusian notions of distinction, offers further insight into the wider cultural contexts which situate the reflexive consumer.

Classed Contexts of Reflexive Consumption

The relationship between class and FairTrade consumption is not explicitly addressed in existing literature on FairTrade, but there is an implicit prevailing assumption that the middle class are the predominant consumers of FairTrade products. Findings suggest that FairTrade consumption is markedly more likely to be a consistent pastime of the most affluent sections of society; at its simplest 'the most affluent are the most active ethical consumers' and 'when it came to the crunch, the … affluent ABC1 group were more likely to be influenced by ethical issues' (Cowe and Williams, 2000: 26; see also Mintel, 2004; Nicholls and Opal, 2005). A related variable appears to be level of educational attainment, with members of the most affluent groups who have been through higher education being the most likely to buy FairTrade produce (European Commission, 1997). This overall picture is borne out by statistics that demonstrate that actual awareness of the existence of FairTrade 'is higher among AB social classes' (FairTrade Foundation, 2006).

Given the prevailing assumption that the ethical consumer is middle class, we are encouraged by the renaissance of sociological class analyses to explore Bourdieu's notion of 'distinction' as a required class performance. We must consider if there is critical mileage to be had in approaching FairTrade as one possible aspect of a 'long-standing middle-class project of distinguishing itself' (Lawler, 2005: 429). Drawing distinctions is, following Bourdieu (1984: 45), both 'required and performed', and distinction is worked through, amongst other practices, consumption. If we reiterate the commonly held view that consumption has for many become the primary site for self-identifications then Bourdieu invites us to consider FairTrade as something more than 'merely' an attempt at a progressive politics via the reflexive consumer's tastes and preferences. Thus Sayer argues that 'the whole purpose of [Bourdieu's] *Distinction* is to counter the view that judgements of taste are or can be disinterested and free of the influence of the habitus and the struggles of the social field' (2002: 8.2).

Bourdieu's work on distinction underpins the 'new' sociology of class in which taste and appearance are seen to be deployed as the basis of evaluative judgements of a person's moral worth and their social position (Lawler, 2004; McRobbie, 2004). Work here claims that the middle class tend to express distaste at particular working-class lifestyles in contemporary social relations, exemplified in such terms as chav, hoodie, pikey, pramface and white trash (McRobbie, 2004; Nayak, 2006; Skeggs, 2005). There is an authority here to confer a normative aesthetic of 'taste' on perceived sections of the working class, particularly in terms of consumption practices which the latter are then perceived to lack. Lawler argues that such a move is a consequence of the

middle-class psychic requirement to establish distance from those that have become dangerously close in spatial, cultural and economic terms (Lawler, 2005). In other words, 'disgust hinges on proximity … when legal barriers between classes get broken down, as in democracy, social hierarchy must be maintained in other ways … [working class people] must be "pushed away" – expelled from a normative and normalized middle-classness' (2005: 440). This need not imply that working-class people do nothing to resist or appropriate these cultural representations. For Sayer, we are all involved in emotionally motivated boundary work, but it is 'particularly strong in groups that are anxious about their position' in relation to those 'above' and 'below' (2005: 953). This anxiety, combined with the symbolic, cultural and economic capital of the middle class, underlies an authority to position others in relation to themselves. Following Savage et al. (2001), this distaste, avoiding explicit class categories as it does, could be part of the middle classes' work to distinguish themselves as 'ordinary' by comparison to the 'extra-ordinary' excesses of some sections of the working class.

What are the implications of contemporary class analyses for contextualizing the reflexivity of an ethical consumer? What first strikes us is the stark contrast between the cultural imaginary of the 'chav' – a specific stratum of the working class – and FairTrade representations of distant workers when we consider them side by side. FairTrade narratives represent a 'deserving' poor who are immediately recognized as such within the global system of representations accessible to the middle class. What is important here is the moral significance of work and labour. Historically, the association of the western working class with productive labour may have allowed them a claim on this moral significance in the eyes of the middle class (Strangleman, 2002: 3.2), which rendered them deserving even in times of economic hardship (as made concrete in the Poor Laws, for example). However, Savage (2003) argues that the decline of industrialization and the rise of consumer culture have meant that being 'deserving' is harder to authenticate. We argue then that the spaces for a localized 'deserving poor' – deserving of middle-class compassion and patronage – are problematized. What FairTrade offers is an expansion of the space for middle-class compassion, but for a different and distant 'deserving' poor. This suggests a more complex position than suggested by Lawler's account of a homogenized middle-class disgust for a uniform working-class other.

In the cultural imaginary of FairTrade, representations of labour focus on detailed, unflinching close-up pictures of hard-working farmers who are spatially tied to distant lands; or fresh-faced, smiling individuals who are engaged in their work *and enjoying it*. There is nothing 'undeserving' here – only images that invoke degrees of sympathetic recognition: of enterprise, hard work, struggle and an aspiration to autonomy and independence. An escape from aid ('hand outs') through trade signals the determination of the distant other. The 'chavs' on the other hand are depicted as 'un-modern, anti-cosmopolitan, backward and worthless, not playing their part in the newly competitive and multi-cultural Britain' (McDowell, 2006: 839). They are identified in sites such as the infamous

www.chavscum.co.uk as lazy, workshy or unambitious in terms of employment, having poor or crude parenting and social skills, immoral, tasteless and ostentatious in their consumption practices – they are the 'undeserving' poor.

FairTrade narratives bestow worth on the distant farmer and, we could add, it simultaneously operates to distinguish a respectable 'ordinariness', potentially available to all (Savage et al., 2001; Sayer, 2005), from the work-shy, and simultaneously amoral, 'chav'. Thus we find dynamics whereby middle-class reflexive practice involves relations with its 'own' white working class (a proximate other) *and* those of a distant other. If, as Lawler states, the anthropological gaze turned on the white working class tends to render them as 'horrific and mystifying others', lacking 'the respect that "the exotic" might (however problematically) command' (2005: 432), FairTrade representations of the other might *utilize* that problematic respect in the global mediatization of distinction. Thus, while the localized working class and others who find themselves lower down the social hierarchy may be perceived as 'horrifically near and intriguingly distant' (Lawler, 2005: 442), FairTrade mediations of the third world poor remove the former and heighten the latter through the 'commodification of difference' (Lyon, 2006: 457).

Qualifying the Classed Consumption of Fairtrade

So far we have followed the assumption shared across most FairTrade literature that the ethical consumer is middle class (Goodman, 2004). In so doing, we have generated a possible explanation of why this may be the case without referring reductively to affluence or indeed rationality. However, while there is evidence to suggest that affluence and educational attainment (Tallontire et al., 2001), themselves indicators of class position, are related to ethical consumption practices, we are reluctant to simply graft 'the middle-class consumer' into the moral economy of FairTrade. Whilst work by Lawler and others draws our attention to valuable psychosocial dynamics, such a portrayal homogenizes the varied practices, reflections and dispositions involved in the work of class distinction, and ignores points of commonality.

First, a lay conception of morality cannot be understood 'unless we recognize that it also spills out beyond [social] divisions and sometimes ignores them', and what 'we consider to be good and bad regarding behaviour [does] not correspond neatly with social divisions' (Sayer, 2005: 951–2). We are reminded here of Savage et al.'s (2001) research into class identities in the north-west of England. He and his colleagues found attempts to 'establish one's ordinariness' often mattered more than explicit class-affiliation in participants' talk. The ways in which this was done did reflect class dispositions in the particular way it was expressed – it 'can be mapped on to both working-class and middle-class reference points' – but also indicated a 'universalising character' (Sayer, 2005). Thus Savage et al. identify an 'omnivoric refrain', which refers to a common element in terms of fairness: 'the idea that people should be treated the same regardless of social position' (Savage et al., 2001: 887).

Second, if we consider FairTrade in the historical context of ethical movements more broadly (abolition of the slave trade, employment reform, the co-operative movement, etc.), 'membership' of such movements is also likely to reflect a traversing and muddying of class boundaries. When Sayer asserts that ethics do not neatly correspond with class divisions, we could look to a number of other forms of social identity. In the specific terms of consumption, 'ethical purchases may … have political, religious, spiritual, environmental, social or other motives for choosing one product over another' (Harrison et al., 2005: 2), which cross-cut class categories. For example, religious organizations such as the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development have been key to ethical activism, mobilizing their congregations – irreducible to a particular class – towards practising and advocating FairTrade consumption.

Thus we could approach the growth of FairTrade as 'a prime example of evidence to suggest that an increasing number of consumers are beginning to think more closely and more often about the basis of their own comfort' (Hilton, 2004: 119), without paying close attention to class. In outlining a 'sociology of suffering', Wilkinson similarly argues that global mediatization has actually led to a 'heightened sensitivity' towards and a 'greater imagination for the suffering of others' in general (2005: 12). He broadly aligns his argument with the heralding of a cosmopolitan culture that 'reflects the growing influence of the ethics of global humanitarianism on public opinion' (pp. 144–5). Therein perhaps lies the potential of FairTrade to live up to the hope invested in it as an internationalist social movement with radical reach and potential: a contemporary manifestation of trade justice movements which have a historical pedigree not reducible to a particular class (e.g. Lang and Gabriel, 2005). Of course, the danger in such assertions is that they can bring us full circle to the explanatory reach of the extended reflexivity thesis and the problems that entails.

Contexts of Anxiety and Ambivalence

Sayer thankfully develops a more subtle argument. In softening the homogenizing tendencies of Bourdieusian analyses, he examines the work of distinction around class as contested by its constituent members as part of the 'struggles of the social field'. To reiterate, in examining morality he is claiming, like Wilkinson (2005), that there is a universalizing character to ethical dispositions which stems from a shared capacity for 'flourishing and suffering' (Sayer, 2005: 5). Yet, significantly, he is clear that alongside this capability, a localized moral boundary drawing *still* takes place: 'while the possession of the claimed virtues is held to be localized, the valued norms themselves are assumed to be universal' (2005: 6). And for Sayer at least, boundary drawing still operates along class lines. It is *not* motivated on the whole by a starkly competitive desire to distinguish one's self from a 'lower order', as indicated in Lawler's thesis, but by middle-class intersubjective awareness of 'the existence of class inequalities', noted by Savage et al. (2001: 880), and by extension one's class advantage (Sayer,

2002). This awareness may reflect avowed unease and ambivalence about class differences:

> There is a widespread sense in lay thought – sometimes articulated, but often only subconsciously felt – that class differences are at least in part unjust, insofar as individuals' position and life chances are a matter of luck, according to the accident of birth. Insofar as actors recognize this injustice – and it is hard for them not to – it prompts mixtures of guilt, resentment and defensiveness, and the balance of these feelings and the ways of handling them are likely to vary according to class position. (Sayer, 2002: 4.3)

If we apply Sayer's account to ethical consumption, reflexivity must be contextualized within these affective 'prompts'. This moves us away from the disembedded tenets of the extended reflexivity thesis to a more embedded and affective conceptualization. The social and ethical reflexivity epitomized by FairTrade (but by no means limited to it) means the middle classes' enjoyment of their fêted status as 'winners' is risked by an awareness of the growing number of 'losers' – exploited labourers, living in slums, with low life expectancies (Lash and Urry, 1994). The FairTrade phenomenon may avert that risk because it 'enables consumers to conceptually reconcile the gap between the haves and have-nots by re-embedding affective ties and equitable economic relationships in abstract exchange relations' (Lyon, 2006: 457). The subjective, embodied nature of unease allows for an unevenness and temporal sensitivity in an individual's relationship to class (Sayer, 2005). This suggests that an individual's motivations for, and reflexive awareness of, their FairTrade consumption is more complex than either the extended reflexivity thesis or deterministic readings of class might suggest.

That said, whilst unease about class injustice may provoke a heterogeneous acknowledgement of unfairness in the class system, at the same time there may be some uniformity in the ways in which the relative 'winners' seek 'to exempt themselves from complicity in it or from having gained unfair advantage due to it' (Sayer, 2002: 4.5). A manifestation of middle-class defensiveness may be to refer to one's own efforts/merits (e.g. purchasing FairTrade products) as a defence, whilst 'the poor are typically expected to attempt to strive to escape from their unfortunate position' (2002: 4.7); though only in normatively sanctioned ways. Similarly, luck may be individualized or marginalized in relation to other qualities. As Clark suggests, 'the sympathy a person feels is contingent on where on the luck-responsibility continuum he or she assigns the other's problem. If one person believes the other has … failed to fend off, guard against, or even foresee a problem, he or she shows the other less sympathy' (cited in Bendelow, 2006: 62); and in such instances, although socially structured, disadvantage is more readily associated with personal failure (Sayer, 2005: 957), as evidenced in attitudes towards the 'chav' (McDowell, 2006).

In terms of what we tentatively refer to as a 'politics of proximity', Sayer hints at a process of distinction in which the localized working-class other is faced with contradictory representations of lack: not striving (lazy, indolent,

etc.) and/or striving in unacceptable or excessive ways (chav, slapper, etc.). There is perhaps a hint of an older bourgeois attitude, as E.P. Thompson renders it, detectable in the contemporary middle class: 'the bourgeois has always been ready to acknowledge virtue in the servant class when it finds it: pliant, loyal, living patiently in the attic, carrying on dutifully a service' (1980: 46–7). Now perhaps the 'attic' stretches beyond the forsaken proximate other to the southern hemisphere in the roving global imaginary of the more affluent. In sum, there may be a psychosocial reaching *beyond* on the part of the middle-class FairTrade consumer, but also a reaching *towards* – a projected connection to the distant, other 'working class' who are more easily rendered as deserving, benign, hard-working, against which a more readily respectable reflexive project can be performed. The careful representation of a distant but spatially embedded producer helps shift residues of guilt associated with the defetishization of the production/consumption exchange, and avoid neoliberal norms of blame for conditions of poverty from the inherent traits of the producer. 'Salvation' via consumption practices may then appear a less dissonant prospect for class-sensitive, progressively-minded, middle-class FairTrade consumers. This particular re-embedding is possible and desirable because the 'deserving poor' are not culpable, but the proximate other 'deserve what they get' in a globalized cultural imaginary. If the account outlined here is to be developed, reflexivity must be considered more carefully as always and already indexical: 'reflexivity, whether modern, late modern or post-modern, can be understood only within the context of cultural tradition, not outside of it' (Alexander, 1996: 136).

Conclusion

Our argument has implications for researchers interested in pursuing sociologically the relationship between FairTrade, ethics, consumption and reflexive identity. First, the extended reflexivity thesis cannot be uncritically adopted as a framework for understanding the choices of contemporary consumers in the pursuit of a reflexive lifestyle project; neither can it be dismissed out of hand. FairTrade consumption as a case study reflects established criticism calling for a more nuanced and structurally sensitive approach. Second, attitudes towards FairTrade and associated consumption practices should not be taken in isolation; they must be situated in the context of a complex system of mediatization and representation, adequately reflecting the roving global imaginary of (some) modern consumers. It is only at this global level, for example, that the 'chav' may in any way be connected to farm hands in the southern hemisphere. Finally, it is possible to acknowledge alternative approaches to what constitutes the 'right' choice in relation to global trade and what constitutes ethical practice. Sayer's simple point that 'affluent people who live off the labour of others are rarely seen as undeserving' (Sayer, 2002: 7) for example, challenges assumptions about social structure, class and the morality of consumption which FairTrade tends to leave untouched.

This does not mean the progressive intentions and outcomes of the FairTrade movement should be rejected; rather that they should be more broadly situated. FairTrade consumption can still be conceived of as beneficial to producers, involving social and personal reflexivity that is politically progressive, and morally defensible. It is at the same time a partial and contradictory process, revealing a situated and contingent self-reflexivity; one which highlights the affective dimensions of the FairTrade encounter (guilt, sympathy, blame), bringing a vital complexity to limited notions of disembedded reflexivity.

In this context, consuming FairTrade might be seen as a (not necessarily intentional or all-encompassing) strategy for attempting to overcome embarrassment or ambivalence about class without having to undo the dirty work of existing defences formed against localized class; providing in other words the 'feel-good factor' of ethical consumption without having to 'relinquish forever one's mainstream positionality' (hooks, cited in Donati, 2005: 231). Thus, as has been claimed in relation to other consumer campaigns such as the slow food movement, 'cultural otherness is transformed into a source of fetishized pleasure without critically examining or challenging the complicity of western culture in the racial marginalization or cultural appropriation of difference' (Donati, 2005: 231).

The FairTrade reflexive encounter can therefore be conceived of as one partially, but not exhaustively, mediated by a complex moral and symbolic economy of class. In this sense, reflexivity is not a somewhat unevenly distributed yet benign gift of late modernity but a prism 'through which classification itself may take place' (Adkins, 2002: 8). If 'middle-class approaches to working-class existence have tended to veer between disgust and romanticism' and, in terms of the localized white working class, 'disgust is winning out' (Lawler, 2005: 443), we have asserted that it is conceivably the romanticization of a distant working class that acts as an important symbolic and affective corollary in the overall discursive production of middle-class distinction. Like disgust at the projected lacks and excesses of white working-class people, it may in part be another manifestation 'of a bourgeois project to distinguish the middle class from its others' (Lawler, 2005: 443). But that does not mean we must uncritically graft contemporary class analysis onto such a complex phenomenon. What is certain, however, is that whilst self-reflexivity as constructed through the FairTrade encounter at first appears to be an unproblematic manifestation of various social changes, in the light of a critical reading of contemporary class analyses it takes on a more complex hue.

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