
Before “fair trade”: empire, free trade, and the moral economies of food in the modern world[†]

Frank Trentmann

School of History, Classics, and Archaeology, Birkbeck College, University of London, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HX, England; e-mail: f.trentmann@bbk.ac.uk

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Abstract. The last decade has seen a vibrant debate about the moralities of trade and the possibility of reconnecting consumers and producers in an age of globalisation. Fair trade, in particular, has attracted attention as the source of a new international moral economy. In this paper, I seek to widen the frame of discussion, bringing history, geography, and ethics into closer conversation. Looking beyond a conventional progressive narrative, I retrieve the ambivalent moralities of trade and consumption in the modern period. I highlight the role of empire shopping movements as well as of popular free trade and international distributive justice, putting imperialist consumers as well as liberals back into the picture. I offer a critique of a sequential view of traditional ‘moral economy’ being replaced by a modern demoralised ‘political economy’, which underlies current notions of ‘remoralising’ trade. Modern commerce has generated and been shaped by diverse moralities of consumption. Greater attention to the diverse social and ideological lineages of phenomena like fair trade will be useful to scholars reflecting on caring at a distance today.

Can moral communities be created and sustained across distance? Globalisation has disrupted space and time, making us aware of the porous nature of place and identity. The international trade in food, in particular, has given physical and symbolic expression to ‘caring at a distance’ in debates about the lengthening of the food chain and the sympathy of consumers for distant producers and vice versa. Within this broad set of issues, ‘fair trade’ has emerged as a test case of the changing moralities of space.

This paper takes this renewed interest in the spatial ethics of consumption as a starting point to explore more generally the changing moral imaginaries that have come with the lengthening of the food chain in the modern period. Different disciplines have followed quite different ‘spatial’ and ‘moral’ turns, drawing on diverging literatures. In the last decade, geography has undergone a ‘moral turn’ which, in addition to giving emphasis to the ethical dimensions of geographic research, has inquired into the social justice of geographical differences and the moral construction of communities without proximity (Cloke, 2002; Freidberg, 2004; Hughes, 2005; Proctor, 1998; Sack, 1999; Smith, 2000). The literature on fair trade and local food schemes has engaged with contemporary ethics and social theory, but not with the historical genealogies of such consumption practices. Historians, meanwhile, have begun a ‘spatial turn’, but their interest has disproportionately been in the construction of territoriality. They have followed the creation and mapping of bounded geographic spaces, the idea of ‘Europe’, and the rise of geopolitics in the earlier era of globalisation a century ago. The focus has been more on how societies were fenced in, mentally and geopolitically, and less on ethical norms and practices that opened up connections across space (Black, 1997; Lefebvre, 1991; Maier, 2000; Osterhammel, 1998; Schenk, 2002). Where geographically inclined historians have been interested in ethical questions, they have focused more on the dehumanising side effects of territorial projects, such as the Nazis’ racial transformation of landscape (Blackbourn, 2006).

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Transnational histories have been concerned with finance, institutions, and technologies, rather than with ethics. Moral philosophers, by contrast, have rigorously debated our commitments to distant others and the possibility of extending considerations of social justice to the global sphere, but, outside feminist inquiries into caring and philosophical interventions on the issue of famine (Held, 2006; O'Neill, 1986; Singer, 1974; Tronto, 1993), this tends towards abstract reasoning, divorced from the changing values and practices that connected or disconnected consumers and producers in the past.

My aim in this paper is to explore the changing moral geography of trade and consumption over time by bringing these moral, spatial, and historical considerations into closer conversation. Whether the globalisation of the food system and the advancing distance between consumers and producers undermine reciprocity or facilitate new moral connections is not a new question. Its history is as long as the history of globalisation itself. Already, in 17th-century Holland, about one third of people's food came from afar (de Vries, 1974). Food became part of a truly integrated global economy in the late 19th century; by 1913 food made up 27% of world exports (O'Rourke, 2003). Observers at the time wondered about the implications of this stretching of the food chain for feelings of care between producers and consumers; curiously, commentators at the time worried as much or more about producers' caring for distant consumers than the other way around (Hobson, 1909, in Trentmann, 2006, page 13).

Where it has been addressed at all, the longer history of caring consumers has been written in a progressive mode. The current phenomena of fair trade and boycotts of goods produced in sweatshops can be placed in a line stretching back to antislavery boycotts, cooperative movements, and buyers' leagues campaigning for better working conditions (Furlough and Strikwerda, 1999; Micheletti, 2007; Sussman, 2000). The point of this paper is not to distract from these precursors, but to argue that a simple progressive narrative ignores alternative, ambivalent moralities at play in the modern world. This has included an imperial project of caring for distant producers as well as free trade and progressive projects of international distributive justice. The roots of this blindness, I argue, can be traced to an intellectual tradition that has seen modern trade and consumption as opposed to an older customary form of 'moral economy'. Fair trade, in other words, needs to be placed in a longer and more troubled genealogy of consumption and power.

My concern is about more than just moving back the chronological starting points for current projects of ethical consumption. The literature on fair trade runs the risk of adopting the dualism characteristic of earlier studies on 'moral economy', contrasting morals and markets as if they were part of a larger system of community and care versus one of modernity and indifference. Talk of contemporary 'remoralisation' or of ethical consumerism as a 'new' terrain of politics presumes that earlier modern societies were somehow less morally equipped. Far from being newly 'reflexive' individuals who discovered agency and morality only in recent battles for fair trade, consumers and social movements have throughout modern history played an integral role in the creation of global markets and imperial systems. In the earlier wave of globalisation a century ago, radical and liberal consumers in Britain rallied to the defence of free trade. After the First World War, conservative housewives began a mass crusade for 'empire fair trade'. I hope that greater attention to these ambivalent moralities and politics will be of use to those reflecting on consumption choices as a way of caring for distant others today.

Precursors: ethical praxis and imperial consumers

Fair trade began with a network of 'alternative trade organisations' in Western Europe and the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, especially Oxfam and the Mennonite Central Committee, and then took off internationally in the 1980s and 1990s. The fair trade model encompasses a range of practices that seek to replace exploitative terms of exchange with beneficial ones between Southern producers and Northern consumers, including the setting of minimum prices, direct purchasing, and the provision of credit and technical assistance. The certification of 'fair trade' products offering producers a 'fair price' has spread from coffee and bananas to tea, sugar, honey, chocolate, orange juice, and beyond. Between 2002 and 2003 alone, global sales of all fair trade products almost trebled, from £335 million or \$600 million to £500 million or \$895 million. Currently, the fair trade network is benefiting over 800 000 farmers in 500 producer groups in 58 countries. Consumer surveys suggest a rising concern for the conditions of workers in developing countries. In the United Kingdom £195 million worth of products with the FAIRTRADE mark were sold in 2005, up by 40% over the previous year (Fairtrade, 2006, <http://www.fairtrade.org.uk>; Global Exchange, 2006, <http://www.globalexchange.org/campaigns/fairtrade>; Nicholls and Opal, 2005). While its global economic impact remains small—in 2002 fair trade products made up a mere 0.1% of the \$3.6 trillion of goods exchanged in the world—fair trade has clearly established itself across the North as a transnational social movement, with shops, festivals, campaigns, and national and international organisations.

Geographers studying fair trade have seen it as a new form of cosmopolitan ethics responding to the increasingly stretched relationship between consumers and producers. From an instrument of exploitation, trade is transformed into a vehicle of global solidarity between conscientious consumers and empowered producers. "[F]air trade represents the founding of a nascent international moral economy" (Fridell, 2006, page 86). It is seen as "promoting a 'critical consumer culture' which challenges the individualistic, competitive and ethically impoverished culture of capitalism" (page 86; see also Reynolds, 2002). Others have commented on the "growth of ethical consumption as a new terrain of political action" (Barnett et al, 2005, page 41). Fair trade, in this view, has introduced a new set of ethical practices into the politics of everyday life.

The precise workings of fair trade for producers and consumers are, of course, a subject of debate. Fair trade may have improved the working conditions, profits, and dignity of many producers, but these new connections between Northern consumers and Southern producers have been constructed through uneven cultural representations, as well as through certification systems guaranteeing a better price. Fair trade involves the cultural 'embedding' of consumers in the lives of distant farmers, at times exoticising and manipulating the image of Southern producers (Bryant and Goodman, 2004). Reconciling the commercial and ethical side of fair trade has never been easy, as the debate surrounding the recent agreement with Starbucks highlighted (Lyon, 2006). In any case, consumers do not necessarily practice what activists preach. Campaigners seeking to position themselves in a crowded marketplace of new social movements may talk about 'ethical consumers', but many people buying fair trade bananas or organic products may simply see themselves as health-conscious parents. The language of the 'critical consumer' caring about distant others may be campaign language rather than an identity in practice (Sassatelli, 2006).

Arguably, the mediating role of money in the act of a fair trade purchase and the physical distance between consumer and producer create inherent limits for its potential as a caring practice. While buying a fair trade coffee or shirt may be a sign of 'caring for', it fails several other criteria identified by theorists of caring, including the

physical work of ‘care giving’ and a deep knowledge of a recipients’ situation (Tronto, 1993). Finally, it could be asked whether fair trade is able to redress the significant inequalities of ‘good fortune’ and the capacity to care that exist in an unequal world. It may simply reinforce the ability to care amongst more fortunate, affluent consumers in the North while failing to overcome the unequal life-chances in the South.

These are important questions, but here I am concerned with widening the historical frame in which this discussion is conducted. Consumption as part of a new ‘moral economy’ which commentators associate with fair trade emerged from a longer genealogy of morally motivated consumer politics and practices. It is problematic to view these phenomena as the sign of a postmaterialist transformation of values associated with affluent societies since the 1960s (Cotgrove and Duff, 1981; Inglehart, 1997). The use of purchasing or boycotting as an instrument for benefiting one’s community goes back to the American Revolution, even to ancient times (Breen, 2004). It would be wrong, however, to see moral consumerism as the preserve of anti-imperialist movements. Here, I want to start by retrieving two more recent precursors that shaped that moral landscape in the 1920s–1940s: buying for empire campaigns and the movements for a ‘just’ world food plan. Both developed in the context of economic depression and war, and both movements sought to reorder the relationships between consumers and producers, albeit with different mechanisms and appealing to different visions of solidarity and reciprocity. They complicate the conventional chronology where ‘caring at a distance’ is almost instinctively located in the ‘stretching out’ of communities and in the increase of global exchanges in the 1980s–1990s, and where it follows on an age of affluence. Caring for distant others with one’s purse is not the preserve of affluent postmodern shoppers, nor the novel outcome of the current age of globalisation.

In Britain many grandparents of today’s ethical consumers would have been familiar with the idea of expressing care for distant producers via campaigns to ‘Buy Empire Goods’. Formally, Britain was a free trade nation from the 1840s to 1931 (Trentmann, 2007). But, though genuine protectionism was kept at bay, the years after the First World War saw a growing movement to promote empire goods. An Empire Marketing Board was established in 1925, which led advertising campaigns and promoted research into marketing and agriculture (Constantine, 1986). As important as this government-sponsored propaganda were efforts within civil society to mould an imperial ethics of consumption. In 1922 the British Women’s Patriotic League first conceived of an empire shopping week to celebrate Empire Day (24 May). The enormous Empire Exhibit in Wembley in 1924–25 mixed empire product exhibits with the thrills of an amusement park—“bigger and more exciting than Coney Island and all the amusements sections of previous British exhibitions put together” (*Home and Politics* May 1924, page 10). In the Palace of Industry the housewife could learn “the right methods of thawing frozen meat from New Zealand, of soaking Australian dried fruits to make delicious summer dishes, and with many other interesting hints that will encourage her to introduce Empire dishes and Empire food into her own domestic programme” (*Home and Politics* May 1925, page 14). An estimated 30 million people saw the ‘miniature empire’ at Wembley. In 1926 the Empire Exhibit travelled town-to-town, bringing to the provinces displays of Empire food (see figure 1).

The hub of this Conservative imperial consumerism was the Women’s Unionist Organisation, which reached one million members by 1928 (Pugh, 2000, page 125). It organised empire cake competitions, canvassed shopkeepers to stock and label empire goods, and offered ‘surprise empire boxes’—the 5s box included peaches, currants, tea, and rice, as well as honey, salmon, spaghetti, sugar, pineapple slices, raisins, and prunes (*Home and Politics* October 1924, page 23). In association with the Empire Marketing Board and local retailers—the National Chamber of Trade joined the



Figure 1. An Empire produce stall in Drifffield, Yorkshire (source: *Home and Politics* January 1925, page 1).

Buy Empire Goods campaign in 1925—it organised shopwindow displays of Empire Goods. In 1930, in the midst of the world depression, over 200 empire shopping weeks took place across Britain; there were also events in Canada and Jamaica. Empire processions, pageants, dinners, exhibits, lantern lectures, and travelling cinema vans advertised the lusciousness of Australian sultanas and New Zealand honey. Posters by the Empire Marketing Board were sent to 25 000 schools. The campaign percolated through an expanding leisure and communication culture. Football fans at the 1927 Wembley Cup Final faced an enormous banner exhorting them to ‘Buy British Empire Goods’. An estimated 12 million people encountered Buy British films in 1000 cinemas (Constantine, 1986, page 210). But imperial consumerism also drew on the homemade cultural effort of suburban conservatism and women’s clubs. One enterprising Conservative woman, Miss L V Sutton of Finchley in North London, even dressed up in a costume of imperial products, not quite, perhaps, matching the seductive charms of Carmen Miranda, but still enough to win her three first prizes (figure 2).

Women’s clubs issued empire cookery books and recipes, and there were empire teas for children and families. Some of these empire fêtes and exhibits were small scale, like the empire stalls put together with the help of local grocers at Alresford. Others were considerable affairs, such as the great demonstration and gala in Burnley on 28 August 1926, which attracted some 10 000 people and 2500 children (*Home and Politics* October 1926, page 16). In Oxford, Empire Day in 1927 was celebrated with stalls for different Dominions that personalised products and makers in ways that anticipate what later would be called ‘emotional branding’. As with the campaign in



Figure 2. Miss L V Sutton as ‘empire products’; (*Home and Politics* August 1926, page 16).

general, White farmers and their products from the Dominions were at the centre of this imperial economy of regard. Canada’s stall displayed bread, flour, grain; Australia’s stall displayed tinned food as well as dried fruit. Kenya had a coffeemaking demonstration “and sample cups of coffee were much appreciated” (*Home and Politics* July 1927, page 84). But native products were displayed, too. From India there was brass and copper ware as well as foods; from Africa there was native handwork, beads, and trinkets. As cultural praxis and genre of representation, here were precursors to the Traidcraft shops and fair trade coffee that would spring up half a century later.

As imperially minded consumers, these mainly middle-class and upper-class Conservative housewives did not, of course, follow a universalist conception of beneficence. Yet, if they did not care equally about all distant strangers, they certainly envisaged an ethical connection linking metropolitan consumers with White producers in the Dominions of Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. As a noncontiguous geographic structure, the British Empire did not fit territorial conceptions of community—Carl Schmitt, the German theorist of geopolitics and critic of liberal democracy, saw Britain as ‘unmoored’, “turning from a piece of land into a ship or even a fish” (Osterhammel, 1998, page 381, my translation). This is what distinguished the Empire buying campaign from earlier nationalist product campaigns, whether in the American colonies in the mid-18th century or in early-20th-century China. The Buy Empire Goods campaign bridged the furthest spatial, economic, and emotional distances of the global food system at the time. It aimed to build a community by fostering connections between the metropole and its far-flung, self-governing colonies rather than by

denouncing other economic rivals. Putting the empire back into a discussion of ‘caring at a distance’ shows how problematic it is to think along a simple divide between the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ and between ‘family’ and ‘strangers’.

If imperial consumerism fails the test of universalist values, we can still see it as a historical stretching of intimate caring relations (family, friends, community) to distant others (White farmers in Australia, for example). It explicitly appealed to some of the same intertwined values that philosophers associate with the ethics of care—“sensitivity, responsiveness, and taking responsibility” (Held, 2006, page 119). Much more than in fair trade campaigns today, the Buy Empire Goods movement looked to housewives as primary consumers and extended the relational ethics of maternal caring for children and home first to compatriots in Britain, and then beyond to distant members of the imperial family. Mrs Hudson Lyall, a member of the London County Council, explained why women should support Conservative plans to scrap free trade and support protection of British industry and preference for imperial goods: “Because just as women realise that their own families have first claim on them, so we apply the same reasoning to our Country, and are prepared to protect the labour of our fellow-countrymen when need arises” (*Home and Politics* December 1923, page 8). This duty to protect and practise reciprocity stretched to the distant Dominions. After all, as Conservatives tirelessly pointed out, Britain brought almost three quarters of its imports from foreign countries, and just over one quarter from the Empire, while the Dominions disproportionately imported British goods. Like a mother putting the needs of her children and her husband before her own, consumers of empire products would express imperial care. ‘True’ Conservative housewives were not selfish but understood the need to reciprocate, explained Anne Chamberlain, the wife of Neville, the future Prime Minister, in 1924. “[E]very white person in South Africa, for example bought £3 5s 11d worth of British goods, but people in the United States only 10s 9d. Are we to take all and give nothing? Surely not. The idea of Empire service makes a more certain appeal to women than the selfish bluntness of a question that asks, ‘What has the Empire done for me?’” (*Home and Politics* August 1924, pages 7–8, emphasis in original).

In the long run, Conservatives hoped, increasing the scale of imperial production would also lower prices; but the main argument, not dissimilar from that of fair trade today, was that considerations of value needed to look beyond market price, to include welfare, solidarity, and public health. “One gets the best value for one’s money in buying fruits grown under the most perfect conditions”, Lady Weigall, the wife of the former Governor of South Australia, emphasised in 1925. But it was about more than that: Dominion farmers “need our practical help in purchasing fruits which they grow as a means of livelihood. We need these products of their labour for our health and well-being” (*Home and Politics* June 1925, page 2). As consumers, housewives became ‘missionaries of empire’. The aim of the empire produce scheme was to “impress British women with the good quality and reasonable price of Empire makes of food”, and “to give them a feeling of kinship with the Empire through the practical help of their shopping baskets; and to help our women to be Empire builders” (*Home and Politics* December 1924, page 8).

The promotion of empire goods wove together cleanliness, race, and standards of production. Empire fruit was grown and packed by “competent and clean people”, advocates stressed; Australian irrigation settlements were portrayed as models of “purity and cleanliness” (*Home and Politics* December 1924, page 15). Imperial housewives pressed for signs of origin and worked to make the more ‘civilised’ standards of imperial products and farmers more visible to consumers—a Merchandise Marks Act was passed in 1926 to distinguish British and imperial products from foreign rivals. In exposés, consumers learnt of the “sweet, clean and carefully packed dried fruits of

Australia and South Africa” in contrast to the ‘dirty’ sultanas in Turkey, where “bare-footed workers coming and going with their baskets tramped freely over the fruit.” “This brown man was very dirty. His feet had certainly not been washed for a long period” (*Home and Politics* June 1925, page 4).

The connections between this imperial culture and current global food systems and cultures of consumption may be more significant than is often recognised. The export of baby vegetables from sub-Saharan Africa since the 1980s is a case in point. Here, Northern retailers have imposed ethical and hygienic standards on producers that recent scholars have described as a ‘neocolonial civilising mission’: ethical trade speaks to the growing food anxieties of affluent consumers and carries echoes of earlier colonial crusades for Christian cleanliness (Freidberg, 2003, page 35; Burke, 1996).

My point is not that there is a direct line between this kind of racial stereotyping and the ethical consumerism of more recent years—although the exoticising of Southern farmers should not be underestimated. Yet, as a genre, the Buy Empire Goods campaign occupies an intermediary stage towards fair trade, representing to consumers the conditions of distant farmers, making visible social and cultural values (such as hygiene), and certifying origins and setting standards that seek to bridge the distance between consumers and producers. Moral consumerism, then, was not just a tool of anti-imperial struggles, like Gandhi’s well-known campaigns (Trivedi, 2003), but could serve imperialist projects too. Fair trade is sometimes likened to a ‘local foreign policy’. Historically, it was not entirely divorced from a local imperial policy.

The imperial ethics of consumerism raise some difficult issues for a historical evaluation of fair trade as well as for the moral philosophical inquiry into caring at a distance more generally. Here, I can raise only two points.

First, reciprocity or caring relationships can involve multiple social and cultural roles, as well as broader or narrower circles of inclusion or universality. The relational connection can draw on a sense of being a parent, consumer, producer, patriot, and so forth, or a mix of these. Consumerist campaigns, like those of Buy Empire Goods in the interwar years or fair trade more recently, are not pure, neutral vessels but bring to bear and mobilise political traditions and value systems that favour certain identities and relationships. For imperial housewives a sense of reciprocity was always framed by familialism. It was not just that it was fair to buy the products of Dominion farmers since they bought British goods (on that count, British consumers should also have bought from other major foreign trading partners). They were family and their welfare needed to be protected. Imperial consumerism here shows parallels with fair trade, which, in spite of its name, is strictly speaking also concerned with questions of justice and welfare rather than of fairness in terms of reciprocity. Fair trade may have broadened the scope of caring for others, beyond empire and race, and included considerations of human rights. At the same time, it has also narrowed other identities. The caring in fair trade all too easily envisages a Northern consumer and a Southern producer. But people in the South are also consumers. And, likewise, there are few people in the North (rich rentiers or welfare recipients excepted) who are not also producers or their dependants. In this sense, fair trade may replicate and internationalise the uneven, hierarchical politics of early consumer leagues in the United States and Europe that introduced ‘white labels’ in the fight against sweating a century ago. These leagues similarly mobilised an exclusive idea of the ‘consumer’, urging middle-class ‘consumers’ to favour certain shops and products to improve the lot of lower-class ‘producers’ (Chessel, 2006; Sklar, 1998). Caring is not a relationship between equals, as feminist theorists have pointed out. Fair trade can be said to create a dyadic relationship of carer and dependent. The Buy Empire Goods campaign, by contrast, for all its racial hierarchies, involved a more circular relationship. Producers were also consumers.

And moral obligations were reciprocal. Dominion farmers produced ‘clean’ healthy food for consumers at the heart of empire, but they were also wooed as vital consumers of British exports, keeping British producers in work. In this imperial version, ‘caring consumption’ was mutual. “Eat an Empire apple a day and help to keep the dole away”, as the Conservative women’s magazine summed it up (*Home and Politics* July 1925, page 2).

Second, empire is a reminder that, historically, caring for distant others is not limited to caring for strangers or foreigners. In the debate over whether obligation diminishes with distance, many philosophers tend to proceed via a series of concentric circles. Those closest to us, like family and friends, occupy the innermost circle normally seen to generate the strongest sentiment. Next come compatriots. Then the furthest outlying circles contain distant strangers and the global community at large. Even those who argue against ‘the compatriot principle’—that is, against the idea that our obligations to compatriots are necessarily stronger than those to noncompatriots—tend to collapse compatriots with proximity and strangers with distance. One critic, for example, recently challenged “the idea that our obligations diminish in strength when we move beyond the boundary of the circles occupied by compatriots and proceed to those more geographically or culturally distant from us” (Brock, 2005, page 3; Cottingham, 2000).⁽¹⁾ But to start out with a conception of a ‘compatriot/noncompatriot border’ may be unhelpful in the context of global modernity, with regard not only to transnational networks today but also to global empires in the past. Partiality can be a special concern for those emotionally close but geographically distant from us, as well as for those geographically close to us. Instead of (or at least in addition to) a concentric circle, where emotions and empathy move from the centre outwards, we may want to consider a more reciprocal spatial model that can take account of the back-and-forth relational thinking and practices that flowed between imperial metropole and colonial peripheries across vast distances—diasporas and other transnational communities would be other examples. Take, for example, the ‘empire enthusiasts’ praised by British women Conservatives in the 1920s, such as Mrs R H Godwin in South Africa, who “can ride any horse either side or astride, use a gun or pistol, and speaks Dutch, Kaffir, French and English ... Her love for England and the Empire is intense.” These women lived thousands of miles apart from each other and from people in Britain. Their sense of identification arose not only from a shared sense of caring in their private lives as mothers or housewives but from a public ideology about what it meant to be an imperial woman. Caring relationships, in other words, do not simply proceed outwards from family to compatriots to distant others. A reverse process is simultaneously at work, where ideologies connecting people across vast spaces, such as imperialism, shape private identities and notions of caring. For imperial housewives, their ethics of care was shaped by an ongoing dialogue between proximate, intimate relations *and* distant imperial relations. The ‘private’ conception of the individual consumer acting out of his or her own conscience so dominant today should not blind us to the influence of these public traditions.

Towards global distributive justice

The ethics of trade and consumption did not follow a unilinear path from local to national/imperial to global connections. Rather, national and imperial visions stood in tension and dialogue with other international traditions of distributive justice. In Britain, the two main rivals were an older tradition of free trade and an emergent

⁽¹⁾Peter Singer’s (1981) expanding circle of moral concern, however, is driven by diminishing prejudice (rather than by increasing empathy).

progressive vision of trade coordination which sought to balance social welfare within states with the needs of the world community. While free trade was steadily losing ground as the interwar years progressed, a new vision was gaining support in labour and cooperative movements and amongst progressives and international civil servants. Plans for international coordination of food culminated in the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) during the Second World War. Proposals for a World Food Board were cut short by the Cold War, but they, nonetheless, revealed a new conception of global obligations. Sections of Northern consumers, especially in the cooperative movement, began to see consumers and producers as linked together in one shared global system. Hunger ceased to be a foreign country. Food security and social justice at home required global awareness and action.

The new internationalist vision wove together social democracy, nutrition, trade stabilisation, and global citizenship. In Britain the First World War blew apart what had been the dominant alliance between civil society, liberal and progressive politics, and free trade. Organised consumer movements, like the 4-million-strong cooperatives, emerged from the war disillusioned with unregulated trade, demanding the control of basic foodstuffs. Across Europe, Labour and Social Democratic parties increasingly looked to the state to guarantee basic food at stable prices (Nonn, 1999; Trentmann, 2001).

The fluctuating price of food sharpened awareness of the interdependence between consumers and producers. Fluctuating prices hurt consumers and overseas producers alike, creating cycles of profiteering and uncertainty, threatening social peace and economic balance, and fuelling a protectionist ‘beggar-thy-neighbour’ climate. Malnutrition in European societies coexisted with overproduction and the destruction of food overseas. Only international action to help distant producers combined with domestic measures to help malnourished consumers could give everyone enough of the kinds of food needed for healthy development. As the League of Nations’ report on *The Relation of Nutrition to Health, Agriculture, and Economic Policy* put it in 1937, nutritional policy had to be directed at increasing both consumption and production: “Changes in demand involve changes in supply; increased demand, increased supply.” Viewing the “world problem of nutrition ... as a whole” revealed an “enormous scope for increase in the consumption and production of cereals and certain other foodstuffs valued chiefly for their energy-yielding qualities” (League of Nations, 1937, page 34).

The Second World War provided an institutional opening for this symbiotic view of consumers and producers. Two years after the allies promised ‘freedom from want’ in their Atlantic Charter, the Hot Springs conference in May/June 1943 proposed international action to boost world agricultural production and consumption. The FAO was never given the chance to fulfil its founding mission to eradicate world hunger. Key food producers like the Soviet Union and Argentina were absent. And proposals for a world food board were sabotaged by an alliance of powerful states and empires (the USA and Britain) and producer interests.

Yet, underneath this policy failure, it is possible to trace elements of an expanding global sympathy and understanding of distributive justice. For groups like the cooperatives, the Second World War broadened the sense of global interdependence. Allied propaganda, like the film *World of Plenty* (Rother, 1944), connected an earlier maternalist vision of the virtuous circle between healthy mothers and babies and strong soldiers and citizens to a vision of distributing food from one part of the world to another according to need. The end of the Second World War saw increasingly vocal opposition to rationing and controls, especially from Conservative housewives but also from some working-class women (Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 1993; 2000). At the same time, it also showed strong support for a world food policy and mutual dependence

amongst Cooperative and Labour women. A higher standard of living in Britain in this view depended on more “conscious cooperation between the rich nations and the poor”. Consuming nations had to stop exploiting cheap colonial labour. Food-producing nations had to stop taking advantage of shortages, but they also should not “be victimised by unreasonably low prices in times of abundance” (Bailey, 1950, page 14).

Attention to persistent malnutrition in Western Europe created a sense of the equivalence of the problems across the globe. To give all people in the world a healthy diet, the Women’s Cooperative Guild told its members in 1948, world production needed to be increased significantly above prewar levels, by 100% in milk, 163% in fruit and vegetables, 80% in pulses, and 46% in meat. Britons, too, needed to consume 57% more milk and 70% more fruit and vegetables than before the war. A world food policy was a problem for everyone. The elderly British lady saving her crumbs for the world was now presented as an example of misplaced benevolence in an age of global interdependence. Even as the global food supply was rising in the 1950s, the early World Food Surveys by the FAO for the first time put a number to the underfed (Grigg, 1981). By the mid-1950s, hunger and deprivation were presented by British cooperators as a normal condition of humanity, not as an exceptional problem of underdevelopment outside the West (Trentmann, 2006).

This marked a seismic mental shift. British responses to the Indian famine of 1876–78, for example, overwhelmingly saw ‘scarcity’ as an Eastern problem. If there was some philanthropy, there was little sense of a shared responsibility, let alone of a shared food system (Davis, 2001). Cooperative ‘speaker notes’ and study circle materials for the 1940s and 1950s show the jump to a more global ethics. As the cooperatives’ notes on the FAO put it in 1955:

“Fifty years ago would anyone have *thought* about a WORLD food problem? When famine struck India, or the potato blight struck Ireland, other people heard of *India’s* or *Ireland’s* food problem. They were sympathetic and sent what help they could. But they didn’t think about a *world* food problem that the WORLD should do something about solving. The first step toward solving it has been taken when we *talk* about a *world* problem” [Cooperative Notes for Speakers, 1955, University of Hull Archives, FAO 55/3/1806, topic 1(1), emphases in original].

The sense of a shared problem, then, was already being formulated a generation before the ‘world food crisis’ of 1972–75 (Gerlach, 2005).

This mid-20th-century evolution of global sympathy and distributive justice did not develop in isolation from empire, however, and it is wise to recognise the mutual influences as well as tensions between them that can be easily lost in more abstract discussions of ethics. Most directly, international plans for food security ran directly into a wall of opposition where international agencies threatened existing imperial power. In the Bengal famine, where millions starved to death in 1943–44, the British government refused assistance from the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. Not surprisingly, colonial nationalists saw a double moral standard at work in allied ideals of ‘freedom from want’ in which international agencies appeared to favour rich countries over poor. But imperial policy and sentiment were also stepping stones for the new internationalist vision. Advocates of trade coordination, like E M H Lloyd, had worked at the empire Marketing Board. For leading international intellectuals like Alfred Zimmern, the League of Nations was the “*deus ex machina* of the British Commonwealth” (1927, page 70). In food and trade policy, as in trusteeship and the use of an international police force, there were connections between new international governance and Empire (Grant et al, 2007).

The growing sense of interdependence and mutual obligation came with a critique of the nation-state and national sovereignty and with a turn to what in more recent years has

become known as global civil society. From its inception in 1943, the FAO emphasised the role of cooperatives for mutual aid, knowledge, and democratic development. It forged contacts with the International Cooperative Alliance, and the All-India Cooperative Union, as well with regional bodies. It promoted the transnational exchange of local knowledge. Reports on the Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance highlighted the contribution of different knowledge regimes and local expertise in improving cultivation. Experts came from across the world. Latin Americans showed Ethiopians how to produce more coffee; Chinese experts gave advice to Afghans on their silk industry. Development had not yet been reduced to a matter of technological engineering. In fact, leading officials in the FAO's Rural Welfare Division stressed the importance of a 'social approach' to economic problems, and of building up social capital rather than relying on technology or capital investment.⁽²⁾

For social movements, too, global food policy became a more general project of democratic renewal. For many leaders in the British cooperative movement, which reached its peak in the 1940s with over 8 million members, the FAO promised to widen the scope of civil society by sidestepping centralised nation-states. The FAO seemed a global extension of local cooperative principles, a kind of self-help cooperative formed by seventy-one governments to increase consumption, distribution, and production. World food policy went hand in hand with support for cooperative democracy and education abroad. Alongside reports of cooperators working for international organisations in the fight against hunger in the Balkans, cooperative newspapers provided coverage of local cooperative experiments in Gaza. Fighting hunger globally required building democracy from the bottom up. "The very idea of a democratic world order", the *Co-operative News* reflected in 1943 (18 September), "implies that the ordinary citizen, who is often scarcely equal to mastering local or national affairs, will have to understand the workings of great international structures." Only in the cooperative movement were they able to find the universal principles and methods of association "which can link in one continuous line of thought the local with the global ... enabl[ing] the peoples to dominate the vast administrative and economic machines on which their lives and livelihood depend" (*Co-operative News* 18 September 1943).

Free trade

Progressive support for a world food policy and conservative campaigns for 'Buy Empire Goods can be seen as two rival ethical and political projects for bridging distance and reconnecting consumers and producers. Their rising fortunes reflected the rapid decline of an older moral vision of international exchange and reciprocity, that of free trade. In the course of the 1920s–1930s that older vision was driven from the terrain of democratic culture which, in Britain, it had occupied for much of the modern period. Such has been the moral rupture and political disillusionment with free trade that most commentators and social movements today find it impossible to even think of ethics, civil society, and free trade in the same frame. Much of the case for fair trade derives its strength from the suspicion that free trade is a selfish creed of multinationals, an idea of economists not the people. This antithesis ignores the ambivalent moral geography of modernity.

Freedom of trade was never without its critics in the modern period, but in parts of the Western world, especially in Victorian and Edwardian Britain, it was something akin to a national ideology. A century ago, it commanded support from leading

⁽²⁾ FAO Archive, Rome, RG 39 0 D1, "The work of the FAO in the development of cooperatives", 4 April 1950, FAO *Report of Technical Meeting on Cooperatives in Asia and the Far East* (November 1949); RG 39 A 2514 and 2611, H Belshaw to the Director General of the FAO, N Dodd, 4 June 1949 and 17 June 1949; RG 39 1 A1, H Belshaw to the Director General of FAO, Dr Cardon, 29 July 1954.

working-class, radical, feminist, and peace movements, as well as from sections of trade and finance. From the Repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 to the popular defence of the 'cheap loaf' in the early 20th century, free trade was supported for offering cheap food to the people, as well as for cementing Britain's export industries and financial services. But to contemporaries it was about much more than economic interests. Free trade was a source of ethics, civilisation, and human progress. For many, the very "purity and intensity of public spirit" depended on it, as the young Bertrand Russell put it: he felt "inclined to cut my throat" if tariffs won (Moorehead, 1992, page 141). Free trade was firmly tied to the Christian ethics of the Golden Rule, which has been seen as the moral basis of reciprocity. A manual worker, for example, rallied to the defence of free trade in the Edwardian period because tariffs were "an immoral policy" that "substitutes 'Do unto others as *they do unto you*', for the Golden Rule, 'Do unto others *as ye would they SHOULD do unto you*'" (Cobden Unwin, 1904, page 212, emphases in original). As radicals tirelessly pointed out, free trade favoured nondiscrimination within a society as well as between societies. Unlike under protectionism, groups did not enjoy privileges such as tariffs or subsidies, which were seen as the source of oligarchy, social anarchy, and imperialism. Internationally, free trade would promote goodwill by not discriminating in favour of one country at the expense of another.

Of course, this was an idealised vision of social and international relations, but it was one with substantial popular support. Before free trade, in this view, feudal elites and vested interests had pulled the strings of foreign and fiscal policy for their own benefit, resulting in a vicious cycle of war, taxation, and oppression. The case for free trade went far beyond a utilitarian calculus and the instrumentalism of 'the invisible hand' which in recent years has come to be seen as characteristic of the impersonal and divisive force of market relations, as opposed to the altruistic sphere of the family (Sypnowich, 1993). For popular liberals, feminists, and pacifists in Britain a century ago, such a bipolar view of a self-interested sphere of international exchange versus an altruistic sphere of familial empathy would have been alien; indeed, altruism was a central concern for many economists like Alfred Marshall and Leon Walras, who are today presented as forefathers of neoclassical economics and utilitarian individualism (Pearson, 2004).

Radical feminists, like those in the Women's Cooperative Guild, still excluded from the national vote and from the male-dominated world of the Cooperative Congress, looked to free trade as a guardian of civil society and a stepping-stone towards full citizenship. In Britain, but also in Belgium and Chile, organised workers saw an affinity between Free Trade and social welfare reforms: an open market and distributive justice reinforced each other. Consumer groups felt that free trade would strengthen the other-regarding mentality of 'citizen consumers' who would think about the impact of their consumption on producers, creating a virtuous circle of higher taste, higher quality, better working conditions and greater well-being.

In the mid-19th century, Richard Cobden, the leader of the Anti-Corn Law League, had argued that just as a shopkeeper was unlikely to confront his customer with a gun, so a nation was unlikely to attack its trading partner. During the armaments race that led up to the First World War, support for free trade and critique of militarism were two sides of the same coin for most radicals, ethicists, and Quakers. At the height of the war, J A Hobson revised the older enlightenment ideal of the 'douceur' of commerce and defended free trade as a peaceful link between consumers across the globe. Under conditions of free exchange, consumers, in this view, learnt to care about and respect others in distant parts. Consuming and exchanging goods promoted civic and peaceful relations between groups across social and spatial distance (Trentmann, 2002).

This is not to suggest that the world operated according to these ideals. The historical reality of free trade was full of contradictions. Free trade did not eliminate poverty, nor did it necessarily protect consumers. Cobden's ideal of peaceful, interdependent civil societies was premised on a hierarchical view of the world, with some countries developing as commercial societies, others as more agricultural societies. Free trade, too, attracted support from Liberal and Conservative imperialists. Robert Cecil, the son of the Conservative Prime Minister, Salisbury, and one of the founding fathers of the League of Nations, saw free trade as vital to Britain's imperial mission, because it kept money out of imperial relations and fostered reciprocity and trust; here again different conceptions of caring were fused. Yet, for all its blind spots, the popular support for free trade sheds unexpected light on the conventional approach to modernity and ethics. Well into the 20th century, morals and markets would run together. For many, free trade was a question of the heart as well as of the pocket, expressing a concern to help the vulnerable and to be open to foreign societies. It displayed elements of an emotional engagement with those in need, which recent moral philosophers have reclaimed



Figure 3. A prizewinning free trade poster, 1904.

as a vital part of caring practices, in addition to more detached moral deliberation (Singer, 1979).

Contemporary debates about caring and fair trade tend to position themselves against a simplified, rhetorical model of an instrumentalist, market-oriented modernity. Commerce and care, for example, are frequently located in a gendered divide between public and private spheres. In this view, modernity produces a split between a public, male-dominated world of trade and justice, on the one side, and a female, private world which becomes the domain of caring. Food riots in 18th-century France and early-20th-century America have received considerable attention as moments where a 'maternal terrain' of food provisioning and caring spilled over into the public arena (Frank, 1985; Hufton, 1971; Kaplan, 1982). Here, it is market failure or the pressure of an expanding market system that threatens mothers' role as carers. Moral economy responds to the challenge of a market-driven political economy.

But this was not the only direction in which morality flowed in the modern world. In global food systems, consumers have also been able to envisage a quite different relationship between public and private ethics. In the decade before the First World War, it was free trade and open markets that represented a maternalist ethic of caring (see figure 3). In millions of leaflets and posters, free traders, including liberal, cooperative, and feminist women's organisations, defended open markets as saving mothers and their children from starvation. The maternal iconography that later became associated with social democracy and state support was developed in popular political economy. Free trade recognised housewives as consumers, as part of a public interest, and as mothers tending to the private sphere. Instead of challenging an ethic of care, an open market appeared as its conduit, connecting civic and private worlds of reciprocity and justice.

Moral economies

In their respective 'moral turns', Western consumers and scholars concerned with promoting caring at a distance draw on some shared views of the essentially amoral and instrumentalist nature of modernity. In human geography and moral philosophy the recent concern with 'remoralising' the economy proceeds from an assumption that modernity saw the unfolding of capitalism at the expense of empathy and social solidarity (Smith, 2000, pages 108f). After Adam Smith, one social theorist has argued, there was a "moral devaluation of economic practice" (Sayer, 2000). In geography, advocates of the moral turn have presented modernity as a decisive shift from the confinement of local place to the "open space of modern society" (Smith, 2000, page 33). Similarly, some philosophers of caring are looking to government to "foster caring connections between persons and [to place] limits on markets that undermine them" (Held, 2006, page 119). There is little or no awareness here that, for large chunks of modernity, people, goods and services have been mobile, and that many men and women looked to commercial exchange as a vehicle of civil society, reciprocity, and social solidarity.

Part of the dilemma arises from a stark dichotomy between customary morals and modern markets. The portrayal of a 'moral economy' which became associated with premodern societies continues to find echoes in appeals to 'remoralise' global trade today. But to what degree does 'moral economy' still offer a useful foundation for a contemporary ethics of caring and consumption? For some, fair trade promises a "new moral economy" (Fridell, 2006, page 86). Irrespective of the vast differences between the global commercialised food system of the early 21st century and the 18th-century world of customary tradition pictured in E P Thompson's (1971) immensely influential portrayal of preindustrial food riots, the 'moral economy' has remained a powerful

framework for discussions of fairness, justice, and solidarity. The elective affinities between these positions are striking. Both picture ‘modern’ society as a demoralising system, in which commerce, individualism, and instrumental action replace custom, sympathy, and reciprocity. Postindustrial ethical consumerism appears to restore a moral dimension lost in the transition from preindustrial to industrial society. There are echoes here of Karl Polanyi’s tremendously influential thesis of *The Great Transformation* (1957), which inspired social historians, including Thompson, and social scientists, with its action–reaction model of an expanding asocial system of liberal markets calling forth a response from social movements and social protection.

A landmark study in the social history of crowds and popular customs in 18th century England, Thompson’s “The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century”, published in 1971, became one of the most influential concepts for social scientists working on peasant societies and development in the 20th century (Booth, 1994; Scott, 1977). Thompson himself was uneasy about this historiographical extension of his concept to other times and places, but the appeal of the ‘moral economy’ model for discussions of development outpaced such reservations. Thompson’s original argument had several parts: food rioters were not just impulsively responding to hunger but had shared mentalities; these were informed by a sense of traditional rights and customs of reciprocity (a fair price); this moral economy drew on an older paternalistic model but was eventually defeated by a new market-based system of political economy (Thompson, 1971; 1991).

What is interesting for the purpose of this paper is not so much the reception of Thompson’s specific argument amongst fellow historians; some criticised him for exaggerating the role of women, others for minimising economic dynamics and interests, yet others defended the influence of customary rights (Bohstedt, 1992; Charlesworth and Randall, 1987; Gailus, 1994). Rather, it is the debate over ‘moral economy’ as a way of thinking about the transition from tradition to modernity, and the supposed ‘demoralisation’ that came with it. For all his insistence on the historical specificity of 18th-century English food riots, Thompson’s case study also expressed broader ideas about the essence of commercial modernity. One target was liberal political economy, symbolised by Smith. “The new economy entailed a demoralising of the theory of trade and consumption”, Thompson argued (1971, page 89). This did not mean that “Smith and his colleagues” did not care for the public good, but Thompson was insistent that “the new political economy was disinfested of intrusive moral imperatives” (1971, page 89; see also Fox-Genovese, 1973; Hont and Ignatieff, 1983). Another, and not unrelated target, was modern consumerism. “Marketing (or ‘shopping’)”, Thompson concluded, “becomes in mature industrial society increasingly impersonal” (1971, page 134). In preindustrial societies, by contrast, the market had been “a social as well as an economic nexus” (page 134). In this respect, 18th-century Britain and France were like “parts of Southern Italy or Haiti or rural India or Africa today”. There were ‘universal’ aspects both to the moral vision of the fair price and to the “confrontations of the market” in preindustrial societies (page 134). The political economy had unleashed a universal process of demoralisation, replacing social bonds and reciprocity with “impersonal”, self-regarding, and ultimately immoral consumerism.

These grand contrasts have proved as problematic for peasant societies as they have for commercial ones. Against the narrative of a single universal transition from peasant to modern society, anthropologists have stressed the role of religion, colonial rule, and values in different contexts. In 1930s Burma and Vietnam, for example, colonial governments lacked legitimacy and peasants rebelled when the world demand for rice dropped. In Siam, by contrast, there were no uprisings, partly because the moral legitimacy of the constitutional monarchy was stronger. Instead of shared customary

views of obligation, revisionists have pointed to ethnic and ecological divisions. Nor are 'traditional' societies free of power or profit-motives. Peasants, like those in 20th-century Bengal, have been characterised as "*both* moral economizers and rational maximisers" (Greenough, 1983, page 833, emphasis in original). Community can be restricting and customary traditions can be short on reciprocity and caring, as studies of transnational communities as well as of local communities have made clear. Caring relations involve conflict. Economic sociologists, meanwhile, have reminded us that cash and caring exist in a symbiotic relationship in many aspects of modern life, such as child care and parenting (Zelizer, 2005). Markets do not automatically erase moral notions from private and public life.

Evaluations of what commerce does to caring often work with implicit assumptions about some greater ability to care for those geographically close to us. History is full of cases which raise doubts about such general contrasts. Food protests in 19th-century and early-20th-century Germany, for example, may have invoked a customary language of the 'fair price', but they were also sites in which housewives attacked Jewish neighbours, pregnant mothers, or soldiers' wives—little practised empathy there for compatriots during the First World War (Davis, 2000; Gailus, 1994; Geyer, 1990). And there is plenty of evidence that the preindustrial 'moral economy' involved little empathy for distant others. The rural blockades in 1795 England, for example, were a direct threat to the industrial populations of the Midlands, which depended on long-distance food. In 20th-century Bengal, heads of families responded to famine by abandoning their dependants and selling their children for cash. To what degree the victims acquiesced in these responses has been debated (Greenough, 1983; Hardiman, 1996), but there can be little doubt that moral economies operate with different degrees of reciprocity and sympathy in different contexts. Scarcity does not automatically trigger a caring instinct or preserve social solidarities any more than affluence automatically leads to indifference.

Similarly, recent studies of farmers markets and community supported agriculture (CSAs) show how fragile the caring connection can be between producers and consumers who do not even have to overcome the vast geographic, political, and cultural distances of their fair trade global counterparts; in New Mexico, CSAs have a retention rate below 50%. The tensions between what producers and consumers think are their shared community and mutual obligations are legion (Hinrichs, 2000; Stanford, 2006).

Conversely, it is important to recognise the moral dimensions of sympathy, reciprocity, and social justice that 'political economy' carried forward into the modern period. The 18th century was not a watershed from a moral economy to a demoralised science of commerce. Adam Smith drew on the work of Augustinian theologian Pierre Nicole as well as on Pufendorf and Aristotelian notions of virtue. For Nicole, commercial sociability was a divine plan to push people towards closer cooperation. Reciprocity and interdependence in international exchange, in other words, had their origin in a conception of humans as vulnerable and sinful, not as all-knowing, autonomous or 'reflexive' consumers as popular notions would have it today. For Smith, commercial man's morality was artificial, but it nonetheless helped to build social bonds and dependence between people across unprecedented distance.

In the course of the 18th century, growing awareness of social distance and of 'society' as a separate sphere undermined the more organic belief in civic virtue as a guide to moral action that had characterised republican thought. Morality and politics became divorced. Trade and travel simultaneously loosened a sense of natural sympathy and mutual dependence between those nearby and raised the question of how trust and human feeling could be sustained across long distances. Smith doubted it was possible for an individual to relate to the entire world, but at the same time he identified new

sources of concern connecting distant others. On its own, sympathy favoured those closest to us, Smith argued—it was our sense of propriety, of being considered proper by others, that drove moral sympathy. How, then, was it possible to show concern for people far away, rather than just for those closest to us? Smith developed two answers—one looking to reason, the other to commerce. It was “not the soft power of humanity ... that feeble spark of benevolence” which was capable of countering the “strongest impulses of self-love”, as Smith put it in a famous passage in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1984 [1759]) where he pondered how a European might respond to the news of China being swallowed up by an earthquake. “It is reason, principle, conscience”—the qualities Smith located in the “impartial spectator”—that steered people’s responses (Smith, 1984 [1759]; Tronto, 1993, pages 45–50). Reason was complemented by commercial sociability and trust. Commerce built trust between distant others out of a shared self-interest in a fair deal and mutually respected codes of behaviour. Commercial sociability now went beyond both the more immediate, proximate bonds of love and friendship stressed by Francis Hutcheson and the society of fear imagined earlier by Thomas Hobbes (Hont, 2005).

Like the ‘moral economy’ school in the 1960s and 1970s, the recent focus on remoralising trade tends to imagine modern history as the substitution of one social system (tradition) by another (modernity). The shift from moral economy to demoralised political economy appears as part of a larger transition from close-knit, cooperative communities to more open, fluid, and impersonal commercial societies, or from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* (Smith, 2000, page 33). Such a sequential model of historical systems, however, is fraught with problems. In fact, for Ferdinand Tönnies, who originally developed the concepts in the 1880s, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, and the different norms and practices they involved, were locked in tension across time, not across successive historical eras (Harris, 2001; 2004). More recently, the economic historian Deirdre McCloskey (2006) has argued that we should credit modern capitalism for improving ethics, creating new virtues, peace, and refinement, rather than seeing it as their enemy.

A sequential view of social systems also distracts from the evolution of political economy into a variety of social and political projects. Political economy was not static. In the hands of Condorcet and Thomas Paine in the 1790s, Smith’s model of free commerce became connected to an embryonic social democratic programme of greater social equality and civic inclusion (Rothschild, 2002; Stedman Jones, 2004). Concern for distant others (via commerce) and for the disadvantaged in one’s community fused. This programme was defeated by the reaction generated by the French Revolution. Still, moral and social dimensions remained integral to the liberal political economy as it developed in the 19th century. For many devout early Victorian evangelicals, free trade was acting out a divine plan (Hilton, 1983). To fail to support it amounted to moral failure; indeed, it might postpone the millennium. For Alfred Marshall, the single most influential person for the professional development of economics, ethics was part of economics. Far from being selfish, a man endured “toil and sacrifice with the unselfish desire to make provision for his family.” If that was the case, why should economists not also include other “altruistic motives” as part of “normal action”? There is little basis to the notion, suggested by authors writing in the ‘moral economy’ strand, that the new political economy “deemphasised” consumer protection (Tilly, 1971, page 46); protecting vulnerable consumers against monopolies was a goal for classical and neoclassical economists alike. Liberal political economists like Marshall were constantly warning of the moral dangers of wasteful consumerism; far from promoting a demoralised science, he was rather “too anxious to do good”, as John Maynard Keynes later put it (Pearson, 2004; Winch, 2006).

These moral values were not just the stuff of high-minded writers but percolated through popular movements and associations. The popular support for free trade mentioned above showed that ideas of freedom of commerce and international reciprocity could be combined with ideas of civil society, social justice, and maternal nurture. Just as it is important to resist the temptation to read back in time a current more neoliberal picture of free trade, so it is important not to construct pure moral antecedents out of ambivalent past traditions. Moralities of consumption are always specific to time and cultural context, and are mediated by other existing traditions and power. The early-19th century boycotts of slave-grown sugar, for example, were not a fair trade prototype. Many critics of slavery supported the expansion of imperial authority in other spheres. Caring for distant others, through missionary activism, an attack on indigenous practices, or the boycott of goods, was steeped in hierarchies of race and gender (Burton, 1994; Grant, 2005; Hall, 2002; Porter, 1999). The women who boycotted slave products did so through a gendered set of values which placed women above and outside the marketplace and emphasised the corruptibility of goods (Davies, 2000; Sussman, 2000). Gendered hierarchies were essential to the propensity to feel empathy, a good example of the mix of inequality and conflict that runs through the history of caring.

Conclusion

In the original turn to 'moral economy', Thompson criticised the 'condescension of posterity' towards the 18th-century artisan. Now, over three decades later, we are running the risk not of condescension but of indifference to the moral imaginaries of the past. Discussions of 'caring at a distance' and of fair trade are mostly conducted in a historical vacuum. If the initial appeal of 'moral economy' in the social sciences was to rescue the food riot and 'the poor' from crass economic reductionism, the danger now is that the lived moral practices of modern commercial societies are becoming all but forgotten outside the historical community.

In this paper, I have tried to steer the discussion away from a simple contrast between rival systems, and between action (soulless capitalism) and reaction (ethical consumers), to suggest that current norms and practices of ethical consumerism are part of a longer genealogy. Fair trade has emerged from the soil of historically changing moral landscapes. These have included not only antislavery and cooperative movements, but also empire, free trade and progressive ideas of global social justice. The ideas and practices of men and women who shaped this ethical field deserve recognition. To conduct the debate about 'fair trade' in bipolar terms of markets versus morals is problematic and unhelpful, historically and politically. It fails to see that globalising commerce and consumption has been moralised throughout modernity, and it is blind to more complex forms of moral reflection about trade and sympathy. As recent work on the possibility of suffering at a distance in our own media-saturated society suggests, such older languages of morality and 'the spectator' are far from obsolete (Boltanski, 1999).

The ambivalence of the moral geographies of trade and global food systems here raises broader questions of agency, authenticity, and material culture. Thinking in terms of a divide between 'moral economy' and 'political economy' triggers a whole series of contrasts between community and commerce, authentic worker and inauthentic consumer, slow food and fast food, and so forth. Many of the anxieties about consumption can be traced back to European and American debates about the corrosive effects of luxury and spending on private morals and public life in the 18th and 19th centuries; indeed, some can be traced to ancient Greece (Berg and Clifford, 1999; Davidson, 1999; Hilton, 2004; Horowitz, 1992). But the lives people have led in the

modern world do not fit these tight ideal-typical containers. Across the world there have been many cycles of commodification and de-commodification, fast food and slow food, public engagement and private withdrawal (Wilk, 2006). Ethnographic studies have shown that shoppers also care about their families (Miller, 2001). We should neither presume that material goods erode caring, nor ignore the possibility that some people in developing societies may care more about goods than about relatives or friends. In the real world, most people take part in a multitude of slow and proximate, middle-range, and fast-food and distant food systems. These have historical trajectories that reach back to earlier phases of globalisation in the 17th and 18th centuries. The moralities of these food systems have been as ambivalent as their material dynamics. Fair trade needs to be viewed as their historical result, not just as a new moral beginning. Ethically minded consumers played as important a role in the construction of an integrated global food system as did large-scale agro-industries.

The more critical, historical inquiry into the moral genealogies of fair trade suggested here complicates a simple progressive narrative. Caring at a distance does not grow in a linear fashion, nor is it the recent discovery of heroic affluent consumers. Students of developing societies have observed the “shrinkage of the circle of moral expectations and attributions” that occurs during times of scarcity and famine (Appadurai, 1984, page 486). Similarly, we may want to ask about the extension of a circle of sympathy and reciprocity at different moments in the modern period. These extensions have not always taken the same shape or direction—imperial consumerism and proposals for global food policy envisage different caring relations between different groups. Some are wider than others, but equally the trend is not all in the same direction. Recent movements like fair trade have involved a narrowing of certain social identities and relationships as well as a geographic widening—the reconnection between partial Northern ‘consumer’ and Southern ‘producer’ identities is an example. The point, then, is not that the commercial world lacks morals and hence needs to be remoralised. It is precisely because modern commerce has generated far-reaching powerful morals that it deserves our attention if we want to understand the potential and limits of caring at a distance today.

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