

***The Fear of the Fairtrade Consumer – An Informed Guess on a Form of  
Consumer Anxiety, Post-colonial Guilt and Anti-conquest***

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Why Fairtrade and Fear? When first encountering the concept of consumer anxiety in connection with fair trade I was sceptical: It seemed all too vague and not quite clear what consumers are afraid of. The uncertainties said to trigger it (“is this really a moral product?”) didn’t seem of a nature that would strike fear in the heart of the consumer... But after fifty to sixty in-depth interviews with fair trade consumers in the UK and Germany the concept of consumer anxiety began to look like something that might actually help me understand our empirical material.

First of all, our interviewees seemed – literally – quite anxious about their moral status. In effect, many displayed a need for social recognition of their practices and beliefs, seeking vindication from the interviewers. So without intending to do so, we seemed to have, quite successfully, followed the advice given by Ian Woodward in his 2006 paper “Investigating Consumer Anxiety”: To use the interview situation as a quasi-experimental setting in which anxiety is produced as lifestyles, attitudes, behaviours are being questioned. And as Woodward noted – it seems a plausible working hypothesis that these anxieties will also exist in other social situations.

The second observation was that not only were there anxieties about one’s own moral standing. Fear of both the global other and the poor closer to home seemed to play a role – never really articulated, but nonetheless there were indications that anxieties arising from uncertainties about global threats and an unruly underclass were partly managed through fair trade discourses and practices.

One reason that the concept of consumer anxiety is a bit vague is that it (intentionally or not) alludes to the existentialist distinction between fear (*Furcht*) – which has an object one’s afraid of – and anxiety (*Angst*) which results from exposure to the world as such. Heidegger more or less claimed that, shying away from the task to face our *Angst*/anxiety, we take refuge in the inauthentic mass society of consumer pursuits (do look up the notions of *Gerede*, *Neugier* and *Zweideutigkeit* if you don’t believe me...). So this would be the most radical version of object-less anxiety, generalised uncertainty as vaguely driving consumption.

Alan Warde, in his seminal 1994 article “Consumption, Identity Formation and Uncertainty” similarly links consumer anxiety to the uncertainty emerging from the freedom offered by a consumer culture – a culture of choice. Taking a hint from Bauman he notes that this freedom of choice always implies the risk of choosing wrongly. Taken together with the fact that purchasing decisions in a consumer culture notoriously are read as indicators of who you are, he points out that what is at stake here is no less than individual and social identity. Woodward

then goes on to suggest that what through a Bourdieu lens looks like consumption for distinction, must be understood as driven not just by internalised habitus and taste; but also by an anxiety to fall short of socially acceptable standards of both conformity and authentic expression (i.e. the demonstrated ability to make the right aesthetic choices without directly copying role models, advertising etc.). What's uncertain here is social belonging and position – the resulting anxiety thus (in a very non-Heideggerian sense) existential.

A parallel approach is that from Foucault's notion of ethos leading over into the concept of ethical selfing. In ancient Greece a free man's ethos expressed in dress and comportment – as Foucault (1987) put it – “is the concrete expression of liberty” – “the way they “problematized” their freedom.” It is as if they had anticipated the situation of the denizen of the world of consumption... What is gained through this is an emphasis on the interactional dimension: the construction of a consistent style becomes important to make social exchange possible where traditionally fixed role expectations are reduced to a minimum. It also stresses the ethical dimension of style as relevant for social life: ethos/habitus becomes evidence for good character. I have used this approach in the past as it connects more nicely to anxieties about moral status relevant in ethical consumption.

The ethos of ethical consumption is not just reassurance within the aesthetic/moral community where it finds recognition – it also seeks security within a globalised world marked by huge inequality, injustice and conflict which we inhabit through our media consumption. Surely, the deprived and wronged have cause for seeking retribution and revenge?

Inequality has been weighing on middle class conscience right from the onset of their ascent to power – already Rousseau speculated about the revenge of the exploited.

Sartre, in his [preface to Frantz Fanon's Wretched of the Earth](#)<sup>1</sup>, brings this anxiety to the point:

“After a few steps in the darkness you will see strangers gathered around a fire; come close, and listen, for they are talking of the destiny they will mete out to your trading-centres and to the hired soldiers who defend them.”

My suggestion here is that the discourse around fair trade reflects the fear exuding from such observations. So this is Patricia Hewitt (as secretary for trade under Blair) on why we should aim for fair trade:

“If we in the west don't create a system of world trade that is fair as well as free, then the developing countries above all will pay a price. But we will also pay a price in even greater

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/1961/preface.htm>

pressures on our migration and asylum systems; we will pay a price in increased terrorism and increased insecurity all around the world.”

The New Statesman piece in which this quotation appears is aptly called “[Terrorism: The Price We Pay for Poverty](#)” (Kampfner 2003)<sup>2</sup>

One way of dealing with the anxiety of the unleashed post-colonial has been described by Mary Louise Pratt (1992) as anti-conquest – in her words “strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony.”

I think I’ve shown that the imagery used in fair trade marketing can be understood as modern day version of this (Varul 2008)

Pratt explains the Linnéan botanical nature of the anti-conquest classification of the world which radically differs from “the navigator or the conquistador”: as it “often has a certain androgyny about it; its production of knowledge has some decidedly non-phallic aspects.” projecting “a utopian image of a European bourgeois subject simultaneously innocent and imperial, asserting a harmless hegemonic vision that installs no apparatus of domination.”

While for the conquest Imperialist the colonised are total others, unpredictable and dangerous subalterns; for the anti-conquest metropolitan, they are transformed into categorised, understood, known people who can be *traded* with – hence the strange mixture of, on the one hand, Imperial insignia of military dominance such as the colonial soldier and the red on [the map of Empire](#)<sup>3</sup> – and on the other assertions of fraternity, federation, and commerce.

I would suggest that, in a way, the cartographic and botanical ordering of producers into geographic/anthropological (the old Imperial social sciences) categories and product categories matches such anti-conquest mapping – or rather: it does so in a more straightforward way since now the insignia of conquest are finally abandoned. I concede that some of the producer imaging (e.g. the Traidcraft images I’ve analysed in *Consuming the Campesino*) still have a whiff of the old Imperial fraternity in which they come across as benevolent, well-treated, peasants.

But this is not the typical case. It is no longer so much the old aristocratic order that is mirrored but rather the meritocratic ethos of the academically educated middle classes, the main recruiting ground for fair tradeconsumption. It has been noted that far from denigration the attitude

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.newstatesman.com/200302030012>

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Imperial\\_Federation,\\_Map\\_of\\_the\\_World\\_Showing\\_the\\_Extent\\_of\\_the\\_British\\_Empire\\_in\\_1886\\_\(levelled\).jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Imperial_Federation,_Map_of_the_World_Showing_the_Extent_of_the_British_Empire_in_1886_(levelled).jpg)

communicated in fair trade discourse is one of admiration and identification. Virginie Diaz Pedregal (2008), for example, points out that producer vignettes underline a truly Protestant work ethic – Jayne Rainsborough and Matthew Adams (2009) have emphasised this point and shown how middle class values are projected onto fair trade producers. So the wall of producer images could be said to fulfil a double function in the management of consumer anxiety: First of all the threatening mass of the “Wretched of the Earth” is ordered and classified and the threat of the unknown thus defused. Second they are transformed into icons – a true iconography in the sense of images of saints of trade and industry which makes them even less threatening and also affords “displacing meaning” (in Grant McCracken’s terminology), Stakhanovs of trade.

Now there is an interesting twist here: This displacement of middle class ideals has a tendency to make domestic underclasses looking very undeserving indeed. Rainsborough and Adams have made this case quite strongly and, partly, it is confirmed by some of the comments we got from our interviewees – although this one is exceptionally frank:

“a family living on a council house [...] and I don’t know they’ve got five kids under the age of ten from different fathers erm I can see that buying Fair Trade will not be their first priority. .. because they are going to go and spend whatever money they have on designer trainers why aren’t they buying it or why aren’t they spending it on something worthwhile”

In most interviews the topic is dealt with more sensitively as there is of course a clear contradiction between the leftist and Christian traditions in which fair trade stands an denigration of the poor. I should also point out that I don’t for a moment think that a majority of fair trade consumer silently denigrate but dare not speak out. What I do suggest, however, is that the fair trade discourse with its emphasis on middle class meritocratic ideas of social justice (which through their affinity to everyday economic practices carry very high plausibility, see Varul2010), in combination with the sanctification of the fair trade producer and the public image of the “chav” makes it appealing.

The risk is to end up with a mere inversion of conquest imperialism into anti-conquest postcolonialism – with the fear of the wretched of the earth replaced by the fear of a barbaric/criminal underclass at home, with the brutality of Imperialism projected into the latter (in the figures of the squaddie, the low level bureaucrat, the cop, the hooligan). While such projection could, of course, refer to the living proof of the street-level fascist thug yearning for the race privilege of Empire, it denigrates all the non-racist inhabitants of the council estates and denies middle and upper class racism.

While there always has been a tendency to merge anxieties around class and race, i.e. for the metropolitan/Imperial elite to turn equally against the colonised/racial other and the working class other, conquest and anti-conquest afford shifting alliances, offering redemption for either one or the other.

Conquest Imperialism – as classically analysed by Hannah Arendt in the run-up to her approach to totalitarianism – produces a world divided into superior and inferior races in which the latter are a constant threat to the purity of the former. The conqueror’s race map homogenises race and totalises race boundaries (as on the once common race maps in which – such as in [Stoddard’s](#)<sup>4</sup> – the different colourings directly correspond to levels of fear and contempt) – the only option is to either avoid contact and isolate – or to conquer (world conquest still being a gratifying fantasy [played out occasionally on living room tables](#))<sup>5</sup> In this situation class division is relativised by an ideology of racial homogeneity.

I found it a potentially useful way to think about our imaginations of the other through movies as they capture quite well the emotional underlay of our attitudes to the Other... an underlay which is uninhibited when the Other comes from outer Space.

The contemporary cinematic expression of conquest fear is Roland Emmerich’s *Independence Day*. What we see here is a fantasy about a complete them or us situation. The interesting thing here is that this elevates the class other to a status of racially same – Hannah Arendt called this an alliance of mob and elites – a typically fascist constellation. So in *Independence Day*, against the Other from outer space military, intellectual and political elite stand together with the Black soldier (liaised to an exotic dancer...) and trailer park inhabiting militaristic “White trash”. (NB how the fantasy about a race war is made acceptable here by elevating it onto a species war)

In anti conquest the reverse happens – and I would argue that this is not just an exercise of status maintenance, distinction and denigration. I would claim it is yet another expression of fear of the exploited. While the conquest xenophobe enters in a temporary and uncomfortable alliance with the domestic underclass – offering redemption as race brother, the anti-conquest liberal seeks backing from the distant Other against the (more immediately threatening) domestic Other.

An excellent expression of contemporary anti-conquest is, of course, James Cameron’s *Avatar*. The common interpretation of this New Western in Space is that we are invited not only not to

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<sup>4</sup> [http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bestand:Stoddard\\_race\\_map\\_1920.jpg](http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bestand:Stoddard_race_map_1920.jpg)

<sup>5</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Risk\\_game\\_map\\_fixed.png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Risk_game_map_fixed.png)

see the Other as a threat, but to positively identify with them just as the protagonist slips into an alien body and becomes a member, leader even, of the tribe. (see e.g. Clover 2010)

Slavoj Žižek prominently dismissed the movie in the [New Statesman](#).<sup>6</sup> Žižek's take is that we fantasise about a (sexual) alliance with the noble savages threatened by multinational (well: interstellar) corporations to compensate for our indifference and inactivity in the face of actual struggles on our own planet

'So where is Cameron's film here? Nowhere: in Orissa, there are no noble princesses waiting for white heroes to seduce them and help their people, just the Maoists organising the starving farmers. The film enables us to practise a typical ideological division: sympathising with the idealised aborigines while rejecting their actual struggle.'

So nothing wrong with the story, only we should identify not with interstellar marine Jake Sully but with, say, Subcommandante Marcos.

But here, I would say (at least with the fairtrade relevant audience) Žižek has it wrong on identification investment. Sully may be the protagonist – but that doesn't mean we are seeing events from his perspective (especially not those of us who are, like myself, academics and fair trade consumers). He is a deeply ambiguous character – and till late in the movie hovers between conquest and anti-conquest – coming out of the world of a militaristic brutal order in which our kind normally don't flourish. He is an imperial low rank soldier out of a Kipling story. In order to fulfil his function in the story he needs to be broken – his body is maimed so that his only chance of full redemption is to inhabit an alien body and acculturate (under our guidance).

The one to identify with is anthropologist/exobiologist Grace Augustine who guides/channels that initially unruly hypermasculinity. She is us. At the same time the residual anxiety of the postcolonial comes through in the ease with which the white warrior gains access to the tribe which is denied to the white anthropologist. But there is also an articulate hope that we may redeem and reform the lager lads with the help of the natives (one of the functions of fairtrade education in schools – maybe?... through "[cross-curricular reference to elements of the Citizenship curriculum, through the key concepts of justice, and rights and responsibilities](#)"<sup>7</sup>) or through the use of celebrity endorsement (Goodman 2010), maybe bending Beckham into a fairtrader one day?

In all cases, and problematically, identification is with leaders – be it the wise woman (Weaver/Augustine), the renegade marine/rebel leader... or the self-confessed middle-class

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.newstatesman.com/film/2010/03/avatar-reality-love-couple-sex>

<sup>7</sup> Cotton trading 8+ - available from the Fairtrade Foundation at [http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/includes/documents/cm\\_docs/2011/c/cotton\\_trading\\_plan\\_8.pdf](http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/includes/documents/cm_docs/2011/c/cotton_trading_plan_8.pdf)

Marcos who, according to Naomi Klein (2002: 3) is a perfect avatar whose anonymity (and educated background) allows us to slip into him so that he

“is simply us, we are the leader we’ve been looking for”.

Žižek is clearly wrong in his claim that we “reject” actual indigenous struggles given that enthusiastic endorsement of the Marcos by this highly popular essayist. He is even wrong when it comes to the Naxalites whom most of us may *ignore*, but not *reject* – to the contrary. Their portrait available from the [Guardian](#)<sup>8</sup> is an outright celebration. Our attitudes reflected in Avatar aren’t that far from our attitudes to struggles on our own planet.

And so what Avatar teaches us is not just about anxiety and denial of the colonised and exploited in the global South but our anxieties referring to the Other at home, the morally corrupt and violent chav... My concern is that this messy set of emotional investments can become a problem for the fairtrade movement.

What are the consequences? I am certainly not [doing a Žižek](#)<sup>9</sup> here: the fact that fairtrade can be used to assuage class anxiety in this way does not mean it should stop or that people *only* buy fairtrade so they can feel better about themselves (and not even implying that wanting to feel better about oneself is a bad motive!)

But we need to be aware of the divisive potential that angst laden middle class consumer activism carries. One thing to do is to create awareness of such a potential and make sure that global justice is not played out against social justice locally (which is what I’m trying to do with this).

Another thing – and probably far more efficacious – is to focus on the worker-worker alliances whose absence in consumer activism Dana Frank (2003) deplores. They are not quite as absent in fairtrade as it might seem though: the Cooperative movement which in a very unspectacular and rational way promotes labour movement solidarities (see for example Lacey 2009).

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<sup>8</sup> The Guardian website: “Video: Arundhati Roy reads from her essay on Maoists in India”

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/video/2010/mar/27/arundhati-roy-maoists-india>

<sup>9</sup> My blogpost “Žižek on Fairtrade and Charity”

<http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/unfinishedbusiness/blog/2011/04/25/zizek-on-fairtrade-and-charity/>

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