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A liquid politics? Conceptualising the politics of fair trade consumption and consumer citizenship

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abstract

A politics borne of consumption is widely contested, not only with respect to the claims it can make but also with respect to the modes of expression it allows and the sorts of practices it encourages. In this paper I conceptually frame the politics of fair trade consumption and empirically ground this account in order to allude towards and explain some of these aforementioned complexities. Conceptually, I discuss and apply Zygmunt Bauman's genealogy of liquidity in terms of organised and disorganised realms of social life (ranging from affective attachment to political activation) to the problem of fair trade. This conceptual discussion is empirically complimented within a series of interviews with ethical consumers. The paper attempts to construct a model of liquid politics which accounts for ethical consumption and consumer citizenship within the context of fair trade. This model addresses ephemeral interactions with the marketplace, cosmopolitan concerns about the distant other and individualised types of action imagined as collective. It alludes towards open forms of engagement and broader definitions of citizenship which both include and exclude traditional political categories of solid modernity. By constructing such a model, I hope to make the case for a macroscopic critique of consumption which intimately connects the structural dynamics characterising the growth of a particular politics to a variety of seemingly banal everyday practices.

Introduction: The necessity of a macroscopic consumer critique

The broad field of ethical consumption covers issues ranging from boycotting as a means of restraining corporate wrongdoings right through to 'buycotting' in pursuit of market driven social and environmental change (cf. Micheletti et al., 2004). Given such a broad spectrum, Schor (2007: 29) flags up the need for a *macroscopic* consumer critique which considers 'a new, critical paradigm that

engages the ways in which consumption has grown and radically transformed notions of individuality, community, and social relations [in the first place]'. Following such a call, this paper argues for the applicability of Zygmunt Bauman's genealogy of 'liquid' times to the capturing of the tendencies of and tensions within the politics of ethical consumption. In doing so, it attempts to contribute to the crucial understanding of political expression and participation under neo-liberalism, a connection which has been theoretically attempted, yet not empirically grounded (cf. Gill and Scharff, 2011). Fair trade is a particularly prominent case for examination, as it is one of the oldest forms of ethical consumption which has demonstrated upward market growth and has captured the trust and engagement of a variety of local, national and international agents.

The paper launches on two basic premises. Firstly, that there has been a reconfiguration of the political picture in the sense of the advocated decline of public institutions as well as trust and interest in publicly-oriented practices. One argument deriving from the fields of the social and political sciences has articulated concern about the decline of political participation and political engagement. Arguably, this has been evident in the official categorisations of public life (voting, partisanship, political behaviour) (cf. Falk, 2000). A dissimilar positioning has been keen on the exploration of cultural politics. This argument regards the quantification of political partaking through electoral ballots as a restricted point of analysis of the political mapping of the present. The second premise of this examination is, therefore, that civic life is considerably kneaded by contextual social, cultural and economic conditions (cf. Isin, 2008). The continuation of a debate on the interplay between politics and markets (Lindblom, 1977) is crucial to an understanding of contemporary civic life within this national context of 'market-driven politics' (Leys, 2001). An examination of these contexts and conditions needs to include the budding literature on the reconfiguration of the very notion of 'citizenship' pertaining to the rising significance of the civic agency of consumers (Trentmann, 2007). In this light, Bauman's macroscopic theory of liquid modernity can be employed as a constructive frame for the delineation of issues around consumer politics and consumer citizenship in the landscape of fair trade consumption in the United Kingdom.

The problematisation of a politics of fair trade consumption can be limited without a reflection on empirical data which explicitly addresses the politics of this type of consumption. The celebration or disparagement of this type of consumption can be drawn on ideological reasons such as those aiming to ameliorate development (cf. Nicholls and Opal, 2005; Lyon, 2006; Stiglitz and Charlton, 2005) to expose the limitations of this type of development (cf. Levi and Linton, 2003; Fridell *et al*, 2004; Varul, 2008). Despite their significance in

outlining the instances where this type of consumption operates in the benefit of the fair trade movement or the free trade *modus operandi*, these studies do not provide an outlook of the citizenry approach.

A bottom-up perspective which reflects on conceptual constructs and their ideological baggage, however, can further elucidate the ordinariness of consumption and how this has come to be closely discussed with politics. Within this paper, an exploration of the characteristics of liquid politics as a politics of contradictions is based on in-depth interview data with thirty ethical consumers involved in fair trade consumption. The recruitment of these interviewees took place during ethnographic research at fair trade events, but also through snowball sampling. Ethical consumers are here defined as individuals with an acute interest in fair trade and with a degree of participation in fair trade campaigning. All of the interviewees have been anonymised. This paper ultimately contributes to an interrogation of the state of contemporary politics within the decline of quantifiable and non-quantifiable forms of participation, taking fair-trade consumption as its conceptual and empirical impetus.

Zygmunt Bauman and the political condition of liquid modernity: Politics is dead, long live consumer politics?

Bauman's (2000, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007a) immense contribution to social theory in terms of his genealogy of liquidity concerns the nature of constructions, such as the state and the means of production, as well as reconstructions of contemporary affect, such as the emotions of fear or love. By explicitly drawing on his broader work which comprises a key route in thinking about the transitions of the social world, we can work through the bias on his perspectives on consumer culture as a detriment to civic culture by building on his frames of late modernity. While Bauman's work on consumption (cf. 2007b, 2008a, 2008b) is part and parcel of his worldview, it does not compute into a constructive view of the politics of consumption. On the contrary, as Hilton (2003, 2008) has pointed out, the work of organised consumer movements has altered the equation of consumption with iniquity. This omission does not generate a negation of Bauman's claims to the caustic forces in and of consumer culture, but the attempt to a reflexive understanding of political claims in and through the marketplace.

The core articulation of Bauman's claims is that contemporary life is the consequence of liquid modernity and its conditions of precariousness, instability, fluctuation and disorientation. Bauman argues for a transition from a 'solid' to a 'liquid' state of modernity in a swift decomposition of social forms such as those

guarding choices, routines and behaviours. Similar contemporary attempts to contain an understanding of the fluid zeitgeist have also been recorded in reference to 'risk society' (Beck, 1992) and 'late modernity' (Giddens, 1990). These perspectives reverberate across one another as they describe a categorical shift in the construction and contextualisation of advanced capitalist societies in the latter half of the twentieth century. The conditions of liquid times include the separation of power from politics, the decline of community, the rise of lifestyles and the seeming freedom of choice. There is a certainty about the constant uncertainty of liquid life which is ruled by the conditions of fluidity, disposability, adaptability and constant motion.

Liquidity equals a reckless motion, whereby the freedom of mobility from the public to the private realm constitutes 'the collapse of long-term thinking, planning and acting' (Bauman, 2007a: 3). Subsequently, for Bauman, liquid modernity causes the negation of political life. This is evident in the historical (and, in his terms, praxeomorphic) evolution of the concept of citizenship. In post-war Britain, the term 'citizenship' has been long associated with the legal sets of rights and obligations that go hand in hand with belonging in a national body politic. These rights and obligations had been clearly and closely defined by the relationship of citizens with the state in a solidified manner. Thomas Humphrey Marshall (1950) drew a particular picture of citizenship, where he associated civil citizenship with the legal integrity of society, inclusive of freedom of expression, religious practice, ownership and the forging of contractual relationships. He also defined political citizenship as the rights to exercise political power, such as partaking in the democratic electoral process, and social citizenship as the rights to a standard of life and to social heritage. However, with the coming of liquid modernity, this static and normative perception of citizenship has become dated.

A further criticism of solid citizenship is that it replicates the patriarchal order that produces and exercises it. In this vein, Lister argues that traditional notions of citizenship within the boundaries of the nation exclude meaningful participation in the global civil society and alternative forms of politics; she argues that 'vocabularies of citizenship' and their meanings vary according to social, political and cultural context and reflect historical legacies' (2003: 3). As will be outlined later, this critique of citizenship can be extended to address the reproduction of the market order. Moreover, Marshall's picture does not account for the infiltration of markets in political life. It remains a traditional perspective and does not address the notion of the 'citizen' in the individualistic and atomised cosmology of liberalism; it cannot, therefore, account for the transformations which have adapted to the neoliberal spirit of recent political times. A new vernacular on citizenship has been developing. Yet, can types such

as consumer citizenship account for the transformation of political life? In other words, can we accept the shift from a solid to a liquid modernity as a shift from a static politics to a transient politics?

There are explanations ashore as to why solid political life appears contested in contemporary capitalist societies. The fall of the electoral process is a primary reason for the mourning of citizenship. In Britain, general election turnout has been steadily waning since the end of World War II. Since 1991, the percentage of political participation in the form of voting has shown a dramatic decrease, which is documented as 'the lowest since before the First World War' (Root, 2007: 72). In a Baumanian tradition, one can view these tendencies as indicative of a politically apathetic age, where non-political realms, such as consumer-driven activities, fulfil the life worlds of individuals. For instance, reality television has been regarded as detrimental to the health of civic cultures when candidates in such shows can attract more attention and facilitate more participation than political candidates or parties (cf. Lewis *et al*, 2005). These official articulations increase Bauman's exposition of liquid modernity as diagnosed with a politically detrimental consumerist syndrome. Beyond solid interpretations of recorded political participation in the form of electoral participation, a recent audit of political engagement in the UK with a focus on MPs and Parliament demonstrates a majority of citizens being disengaged/mistrustful (24% of British adults) or detached cynics (17% of British adults) (Audit of Political Engagement, 2010). The disengaged/mistrustful grouping includes young members of the public (more than half aged under 35) with 'a lukewarm commitment to voting' (ibid.: 55), while the detached cynics were positively inclined towards elections, despite the cynicism. The loss of trust and interest in static formations of politics is evident from this cumulative percentage of 41% negatively inclined towards parliamentary procedures.

Consequently, liquidity also equals existence in trembling terrains; the lack of public space in which citizenship is made manifest is causing citizens to retreat private realms in both the institutional and individual sense; by this I mean that the private space of the marketplace becomes a platform for the exercise of politics (cf. Micheletti et al., 2004) and that the private action of consumption remains an individual and often confusing identity (cf. Coleman and Blumler, 2009). So, if the politics of solid modernity are in crisis, what kind of politics are thriving in liquid modernity? In an interesting contrast with the decline of political trust, indicative are the rising levels in fair trade which boast 90% consumer trust as of 2011 (Fairtrade Foundation, 2011). The dominion of the market-based politics of fair trade is also evident in the high levels of growth between 1999-2009 when spending on ethical food and drink has increased by 27% in the last two years from £5.1 billion to £6.5 billion (Ethical Consumerism

Report, 2009). An understanding of liquid politics will have to be open to forms of civic engagement as inclusive and exclusive of the conventional. Bennett pertinently argues that 'new forms of public identity and civic life are emerging as old patterns fade away' (2000: 307). Such an idea of politics, which resonates with Bauman's liquidity, borrows notions around the decline of traditional politics, the precariousness of citizenship, individualism and the decomposition of the collective, as well as the reign of consumerism. Ephemerality, individualisation and increasing consumerism mark the key parameters of liquid politics.

Liquid individualised fair trade consumption does not deny solid collective political acts, such as voting. In fact, the majority of interviewees declared to be ardent voters. Therefore, a liquid politics does not negate a solid politics. The meshing of the two can return us to arguments such as those posed by nineteenth century European thinkers - inclusive of Marx whose famous quote from the Communist Manifesto with Engels is 'all that is solid melts into air' - who have identified a 'gaseous modernity' where, as Jay (2010: 96) argues, 'the transitional stage of liquidity was being by-passed with the rapid dissolution of the traditional world'. Conversely, the idea of a gaseous modernity holds a neutrality which is problematic, as it cannot hold on to the possibility of critique on the basis that there is no repetitive order or mode of control. Gaseous modernity is also improbably because of the concurrent existence of solid structures and practices within liquid patterns. Berman's (1988) thesis represents a breakage from this type of thinking in the sense that it attempts to construct an experiential understanding of modernity which escapes a grand narrative of humanitarianism but does not negate the lessons learnt from it theoretical backdrop. Berman's understanding of modernity resonates with Bauman's broader theorisation of liquid modernity and the latter persist as a more appropriate framework for recognising and redefining the changes in agency and structure, spaces and political orientations.

By building and gradually deconstructing a model of liquid politics for the case of ethical consumption in the case of fair trade, I bring the relevance of Bauman's modernity into light. A model of liquid politics is filled with tensional relationships between sustainability and ephemerality, political and market-based participation, consumption and commodification. One can imagine the reasons as to why Bauman has not discussed a model of liquid politics, given that he argues for an over-arching capture of liquid modernity by consumerism. In this way, politics in liquid and solid modernity become dilapidated. However, there are elements of liquid modernity which allow for the interrogation of politics beyond solid institutions and practices. By looking for these in ethical

consumption, we can identify the opportunities for an articulation of politics and the hindrances evoked by the precarity of liquid modernity.

The cultural politics of consumption: Consumer citizenship, fair trade consumption and liquid politics

A politics of solid modernity is one which emphasises traditional modes of political operation. By doing so, it escapes what recent perspectives on the politics of consumption have termed 'commodity activism' (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012). Commodity activism serves to elucidate the tendencies of cultural politics and provokes the question as to whether a model of a liquid politics can define civic engagement in actions central and peripheral to a politics of consumption. The sudden decline of primary civic habits has spurred discussions on the relevance of a more uncongealed version of citizenship. This has been phrased as 'cultural citizenship'. Stevenson (2003, 2012) regards the term as an approach to investigate questions of cultural respect and cultural democracy inclusive of cosmopolitan tendencies, ecological sensitivities and consumer practices among other variables. The link between cosmopolitan and consumer citizenship in the case of fair trade is evident according to Bauman (2007a: 247) who argues that the emergence of '"consumer activism" is a symptom of the growing disenchantment with politics'. Accordingly, citizenship can refer to acting politically in a variety of ways and settings, ranging from everyday practices to full-on activism.

The proliferation of various types is evident in a range of activities such as participating in local politics or campaigning groups, attending demonstrations or protest marches, participating in boycotts or consuming ethically. The latter is relevant here as related to commodity consumption (Stevenson, 2003; Micheletti et al., 2004; Root, 2007). The long-standing marriage of politics with markets is explored as a playground of civic life. Participation in fair trade through the consumption of ethically produced and sourced goods has been gaining impetus in the United Kingdom. By elaborating on the consequences of the existence of such forms of participation through an understanding of its degrees and contexts, an articulation of liquid politics becomes possible. In terms of degrees, an 'elusive engagement' (Dahlgren, 2009: 13) is examined through the conditions of liquid modernity and through the merging of public and private spaces and action.

A reconfiguration of modalities of citizenship is at play; here I am interested in the exploration of the consequences of the conditions of liquid modernity on citizenship. There has been a blooming of different avatars of citizenship which

are not mutually exclusive; terms such as 'ecological-citizen', 'consumer-citizen', 'cosmopolitan-citizen', 'intimate-citizen' or 'youth-citizen' are now valid terms to describe citizenship through the practice of according acts (Isin and Nielsen, 2008). The difference between a solid model, thus, and a liquid model of citizenship is broadly to be found in the difference between commitment and choice; solid citizenship is about membership and sustenance, while liquid citizenship is about expression and choice. For instance, an ecological-citizen in this sense is one who subscribes to an environmental cause, but is also very likely to be a consumer-citizen when preferring recyclable or environmentally sustainable products. The correlations between these different forms of civic engagement are constant, and point to the unstable construction of citizenship. Within the context of liquid modernity, civic life appears as only one part of a warped whirlpool of threads, the total of which can allure citizens into a different realm, one where consumption offers the sense of a more direct and less confusing representation than parliamentary politics. The fluidity of citizenship roles has become a transient mode of participation.

Cultural citizenship, thus, necessitates the exploration of the politics of liquid modernity as an overarching context. Consumer citizenship, specifically, has been treading that thin line between commitment and choice. But this, explicitly, can be interpreted in light of a liquid politics characterised by individualisation, plasticity and consumerism. The ephemeral nature of consumer citizenship is rooted in the attempt, but unstable ability of citizens to practice ethical consumption. Ease of access to fair trade goods in the mainstream market is a definitive factor in its commercial success. Going out of one's way in order to consume ethically is not the norm for the majority of interviewees. Two thirds of the respondents underlined ready availability as a crucial determinant to their ethical consumption rituals.

> I guess I know it's really easy to buy fair trade bananas, [be]cause in my local supermarket they're all fair trade. (Joanna)

> The [fair trade] food in the supermarket I will always choose, it's my policy now. But if I'm buying oranges or mango or whatever... it's easy, it's easy for me... I'm not going to walk around with my pineapple all day long, you know? (Abigail)

It appears, then, that commitment to fair trade is enabled by the effortlessness of ethical consumption in familiar commercial spaces. This resonates with a notion of liquid politics as fleeting participation. This type of casual engagement with the ethical marketplace is facilitated by the ease of access to it. There is a difference identified between ethical choice based on proximity and ethical choice based on distance from the shop to the home.

Consumer citizenship is resolutely about transient convenience. In terms of perception, as a 'powerful site for politics' (Micheletti et al., 2004: ix), the marketplace is regarded as empowering by interviewed fair trade consumers. However, without being prompted, the majority of these who are involved in the practice of ethical consumption clarified that they perceived ethical consumption as an act of political connotations or 'politics with a small p'.

> [Ethical consumption is] political with a small p, because you're making a choice to do something; to buy fair trade goods. (Harriet)

> [Involvement in ethical consumption is] not political with a capital P, but I'm making a decision to try and do what I can at that point to ensure that someone else gets a fair deal and I think that is political. (Anna)

The decapitalisation of the term 'politics' speaks to the difference between solid and liquid politicisation; solid politics is politics in the parliament, while liquid politics is politics in the marketplace. Less observable was the lack of sharing this view; as less than a third of interviewees did not believe that their involvement in coffee activism is inherently political.

> It feels like it is less political, it's more just about... fundamental beliefs that you have ... I don't see them as being overtly political. It's just that's what I believe in and it's not to do with politics... I don't know. (Joanna)

A conceptualisation of liquid politics is relevant; this is so because such a model can help organise the theoretical backdrop of the politics of consumption with the grounded experiences of liquid consumption. Citizens' connection with parliamentary politics cannot be confined to their exercise of the right to vote, which has been decreasing. Consumer citizenship is enacted individually, in contrast with the practices of Politics with a capital p. The body politic has, therefore, been, both in market and political arenas, influenced by the parameter of individualisation.

> I suppose I would say I'm part of the modern trend of kind of personal politics, rather than party politics. So, kind of various issues I would buy into on a personal level, but I don't necessarily feel are offered as a sweep by any one party, and I think that for a lot of people has been one of the reasons that fair trade and these sort of organisations are so successful [is] because they offer you as an individual the opportunity to do something rather than signing up to an organisation and delegating your power, sort of to speak, to them. (Amanda)

In this statement, it is clear that there is a connection between a liquid politics and an individually chosen and performed type of cultural citizenship, as opposed to a solid politics which is linked to collective performances of Marshall's perception of citizenship. However, an intricate relationship exists between individuality and collectivity here. Micheletti (2003) describes such

forms of participation as 'individualized collective action'; this is applicable to types of political action subject to solitary experiences imagined as collective in the private realm of the market.

In fact, in liquid politics there is matrix of parameters in the determination of the focus and space of the enactment of citizenship acts. Such a perception of politics also allows for a global vista into a political imaginary. The very existence, history and nature of coffee activism have been infused by the increasing connection between the commodity-producing communities of the global South and the commodity-consuming individuals of the global North:

> [I'm interested in] local and international [politics], but not national. I think locally I guess because I feel I have more chance making a difference in my votes and internationally, because it's so important. Nationally, I feel very ambivalent about, because I think honestly it's not going to make much difference how I vote and also that the difference that it makes isn't going to be that. (Melissa)

The effects of globalisation in terms of the relevant freedom of mobility in international travel and the ubiquitous mediation of global issues has been considered crucial to the reconfiguration of identity and citizenship. This is especially the case in terms of forming an understanding of the issues facing citizens of the world. Stevenson (2003: 5) views cosmopolitan citizenship as a form of cultural citizenship, which 'seeks an institutional and political grounding in the context of shared global problems'. Theories of cosmopolitanism attempt to explain how the intensification of links between cultures and individuals has almost removed national blinkers from citizens (Featherstone, 2002). Cosmopolitanism, then, in terms of political identity, refers to widened citizen consciousness with respect to international issues. Consumer citizenship, however, does not entail a coherent manifestation of a global citizenship (Sassatelli, 2007: 226), but it rather instils an imagined emotional attachment to the act of ethical purchase.

As transience penetrates into the borders of the national state, the impact of globalisation on the consciousness and emotional life of citizens is considered to have 'stamped' citizenship with a mark of cosmopolitanism. A re-examination of attention to local, national and international politics is essential. Coleman and Blumler (2009) discern between institutionalised forms of citizenship, such as legal-judicial citizenship and political citizenship, and a different form of 'affective citizenship'. This affective dimension of citizenship has been described as 'caring consumption' (Littler, 2009) where cosmopolitan citizenship and concerns become entwined with consumption; this, in turn, is important in understanding the various extensions of citizenship. There is a growing sense of amplified affective engagement in the sense of 'cosmopolitan empathy' (Beck,

2006) which is grounded and enacted locally at various physical spaces. From its basis, a supply and demand balance which delivers the success of the cosmopolitan fair trade narrative places the consumer at a more privileged position and the producers at an under-privileged position.

By outlining specific types of stories, fair trade activism is mostly recognised as promoting the life stories of farmers and beckoning the consumer to actively change them to the better. By narrating the consequences of opposing life circumstances, fair trade activism signifies and stresses the responsibility of (consumer) action. For example, the repertoires of the fair trade cause have been framing participation in the cause as a predominantly market-based phenomenon which is encouraged through the affective connection of consumers with producers narrated in the promotional material of the movement (cf. Lekakis, forthcoming). Similarly, but in a more individually-fulfilling manner, Soper (2004; Soper et al., 2009) describes 'alternative hedonism' which can serve to satisfy both the requirements of an ethical market as well as the self-congratulating consumer. One interviewee correspondingly suggested that fair trade consumption should not be regarded as a political outlet, but rather as a means of self-expression.

> I would agree more to it actually to have its own spirit, its own motor, if it works by itself, not if it's a tool of politics. I think that's why fair trade organisations have grown very much. Because it hasn't been a tool of politics, it's actually a tool for people to express themselves. (Gabriella)

This narrative of self-expression coincides with the narrative of affective connection through the marketplace. Cosmopolitan consumer citizenship attempts to make claims to global rights and responsibilities. In the case of the fair trade movement, consumers in the global North make political claims about the lives of the producers in the global South by articulating through their ethical purchases an intended contribution to the conditions which frame the producers' life conditions (cf. Huey, 2005; Nicholls and Opal, 2005). Fair trade is also a case where, as aforementioned, the 'cosmopolitan-citizen' meets the 'consumer-citizen'. The infiltration of consumer culture in manifestations of citizenship can therefore not be denied.

Indeed, the mechanism which facilitates the manifestation of consumer citizenship is the marketplace. The assumption is that the purchase of ethically produced and traded goods either makes the consumer comply with certain moral standards and/or makes claims to the mainstream market for the integration of morality. But this new form of consumption does not only have moral repercussions. A consumer-infiltrated citizenship and concerns 'globalizing responsibility' (cf. Barnett et al., 2011). In the particular politics of

fair trade, this type of citizenship is more apparent than others. Through its diverse manifestations in raising awareness, advocating, and protesting for solidarity in international coffee trade, coffee activism is one of the most interesting examples of how activism is now centred around a single-issue which is global and at the same time local, political but also commercial. However, this raises concerns in relation to the banality of cosmopolitan consumer citizenship, as elaborated in the next section. Therefore, a picture of liquid politics can be drawn in light of the political detriment of solid modernity and the market high life of liquid modernity.

Liquid politics: Can the model be conceptualised?

The extrapolation of an argument on the existence of a politics of liquid modernity offers a substantive way of conceptualising the politics of consumption in terms of ephemeral participation, cosmopolitan concerns and a particular type of individualised action. In a time of decreased political interest and increased consumer participation, this is a picture which validates Bauman's framing of the aftermath of the growth of consumer society at the expense of political society. Bauman does not discuss liquid politics as he views it as captured and capitalised by liquid modernity. However, while his genealogy of liquidity negates traditional politics, liquid politics can be associated with fleeting interactions, cosmopolitan concerns and individualised types of action.

A liquid politics is prone to open forms of engagement and broader definitions of citizenship both inclusive and exclusive of the traditional politics of solid modernity; it, therefore, captures legal-judicial and political, but also affective formats of participation. The driver for the articulation of this kind of politics stems from the evident decline of traditional modalities of politics, the precariousness of institutions and individuals within the matrix of international relations and development, the individualisation of existence both in a neoliberal (self-managerial) perspective, but also from an institutional one (in terms of the decline of publicly-oriented institutions), the consequent decomposition of the collective and the reign of consumerism in advanced capitalist societies. Later I explore how the meshing of political and economic behaviour is (undemocratically) perceived as matching rather than clashing. The cultural politics of liquid modernity belong to an ephemeral culture, an individualist society, a consumerist politics and a commodifying system.

The ephemeral element which underlines the liquid politics of consumption stems from a culture of '*disengagement, discontinuity and forgetting*' [italics in original] (Bauman, 2005: 62). This is palpable in the fragmentation of cultural

citizenship facades and lack of sustenance in the performance of non-committing acts. Shopping is an act which is subject to ritual, but also to the lack of commitment. While fair trade might be the primary option in the ethical choices of consumers in the UK, there is no guarantee that the ritual of fair trade consumption will not wane if the structural facilitation of the fair trade market alters its ways. For instance, the mainstreaming of the fair trade market was accelerated by the stronger involvement of corporate agents from manufacturers to distributors and the promotional culture of fair trade has been heavily influenced by these (cf. Lekakis, 2012). The placing of ethical products on supermarket shelves has enlarged the market capacity of fair trade, but also enveloped ethics in a jungle of other products. It would appear that while availability of fair trade products underscores the consumer habits of ethical consumers, it does not necessarily translate into a solid, ritualised activity.

Another determinant of liquid politics is that it exists within an individualistic society where '*individuality is a task set for its members by the society of individuals* – set as an individual task to be individually performed, by individuals using individual preferences' [italics in original] (Bauman, 2005: 18). A critique of the politics of fair trade requires an interrogation of the notion of individualisation. As a movement which prioritises individual forms of participation (namely consumption) fair trade can be susceptible to a neoliberal mentality. Additionally, while it aims to contest the market fundamentalism of a system of global trade, it softens the antagonism between free trade and fair trade by attempting to create a pedagogical relationship where the second teaches the first (Lamb, 2009) while it underscores the political agency of the consumer rather than emphasising the consumer agency of the citizen; in this way, there is a transference of priority from the citizen to the consumer.

By mobilising individualities through the market, there is little guarantee of the prioritisation of moral, social and environmental standards over profit. Increasingly, more citizens seek opportunities and structures to express themselves politically. Solid formats of political engagement, while present, can be opted out of; as Katherine pointed out,

> I could go and do lots of rallies in parliament and constantly write to my MP and stuff, but it's not something I choose to do really.

One of the arenas where citizens choose to do so is the market, where consumer capitalism appears to allow and enable them to make political claims. Dispersion of politics is typical of the conditions of liquid modernity, where project-type thinking, such as setting the task to purchase fair trade at the next shopping trip, penetrates all forms of social life. The project-type ethical thinking that matches

the shopping list mentality of the consumer corresponds directly to the commodification of fair trade politics (cf. Lekakis, 2012).

The politics of fair trade consumption is, above all, a consumerist politics belonging to a commodifying system avid for market performance and prominence, in the sense that it creates a market as well as serves it. Bauman (2005: 89) writes:

> whatever the market touches it turns into a consumer commodity; including the things that try to escape its grip, and even the ways and means deployed in their escape attempts.

I take this as one definition of banality pertaining to the politics of consumption. But while Bauman expresses this in the pejorative sense, I also consider superficiality to be a parameter of banality in the sense of ephemeral, on-the-surface connection in light of liquid modernity. Billig (1995) speaks of 'banal nationalism' as manifested in symbolic repertoires ranging from superficial to meaningful expressions of affective citizenship; his invaluable exploration of banal nationalism embraces the notion that nationalism is rendered banal in the sense that it is invisible but omnipresent and latent but potent. There is relevance here between the banality permeating national belonging and cosmopolitan belonging with regards to the politics of fair trade consumption.

Beck (2002, 2004) discusses the range of 'banal cosmopolitanism', which concerns the final parameter of liquid politics; through the assumption of connection between producers in the global South and consumers in the global North fair trade consumption is inescapably interconnected and interrelated with the political project of neoliberalism. Beck (2004: 151) posits that banal cosmopolitanism

> is closely bound up with all kinds of consumption ... the huge variety of meals, food, restaurants and menus routinely present in nearly every city anywhere in the world [and] also penetrates other spheres of everyday culture – music, for example.

I would argue that there is a specific type of banality attached to fair trade consumption and the political claims which it connotes. Rhetorically, in the repertoires of fair trade activism there has been a framing of the gap between the distant producing others and the home-based consuming 'us' (Lekakis, forthcoming). This supposition creates a safety and comfort in the enjoyment of fair trade consumption, but also a silencing in the questioning of its relationship with free trade.

Another definition of banality in the politics of consumption concerns the mode of address of other people. One of the many discerning factors between fair trade

and other types of ethical consumption (i.e. organic, vegetarian, free range, sustainable fish) is that fair trade corresponds to a movement vis-à-vis neoliberalism, while the other types do not do so, explicitly at least. Fair trade is the only type which directly addresses the very modality of the global trade cycle; in doing so it encompasses a variety of social and environmental justice-related parameters which concern the production and distribution of fairly-traded products. Fair trade products are not products which are intended for the benefit of the consumer alone or produced for purposes or environmental sustainability; fair trade products include a consideration of a community of *Others*, i.e. distant strangers who are repeatedly exoticised (Varul, 2008) but who are reported by campaigners to be present in the imagination of ethical consumers. An added level of banality, therefore, is evident in the connection between the producing others and the consuming us; this connection is transient, skin-deep and enabled by consumerism. Fair trade consumption then resounds with banal cosmopolitanism in the sense that ethical consumer choices are presented as opportunities to connect through the ethical marketplace.

Furthermore, confusion exists with regards to the relationship between free and fair trade, making the political goal of fair trade an elusive thought. For interviewees the question of this relation is a frustrating one:

> I'm not an economic expert for one and I don't know, ... if we leap from a capitalist market to a completely fair trade market, I don't know if that'll work. ... I do understand why capitalism exists ... I also know that we're never going to have 100% fair trade market and, as far as I see it, however much I can increase what we do have is a good thing [be]cause I know we're never ever going to abolish free trade.... I mean completely free trade is not fair basically, it's not fair. (Melissa)

Banality can also be found in the idea of marketplace democracy where the marketplace accounts for the space where citizens flee to cast their economic vote after disillusionment with the eroded political space (cf. Dickinson and Carsky, 2005; Cherrier, 2006). This is the premise of interrogation of liquid politics as it provides a hasty answer to the question of where people can behave politically when solid politics has been wasted. However, a better question to escape from the duality of arguments supporting the absolute harmony between markets and political behaviour or the opposing view of the capitalisation of politics by markets would be how people can behave politically when solid politics has been wasted. Voting in the space of the market does not have the same connotations or implications as it has in the realm of politics. So, a model of liquid politics can further allow us to build a critique of consumer politics that is both productive in terms of understanding reconfigurations of political life and sober in terms of understanding its limitations.

Liquid consumer culture and critical doubt

With waning rates of officially recorded and recognised political participation, a theorisation of unofficial, meddled and unanchored political participation is useful in accounting for tendencies as well as tensions in the grounding of politics. In terms of a strict political vernacular which resonates with solid manifestations of political participation, there is a decline of connection with the processes which formulate the conduct of everyday life. However, alternative vocabularies of civic life can account for the displacement of politics. Therefore, the normative conceptualisations of solid modernity cannot account for the transformations of liquid modernity. In a book that preceded his theorisation of liquid modernity, *In search of politics*, Bauman (1999: 108) wrote that:

> doubt is the most precious gift thinkers may offer to the people who desperately try to find their way while smarting in the double bind of the inert burden of the TINA[1] strategy at the top and the hazard of the privatized life-politics at the bottom.

Critical doubt does not equal a negation of the strategies of citizens to political expression and action, despite the many limitations of ethical consumerism as a vehicle for political change. It is precisely this relationship between political expression and political change that characterises the restrained politics of fair trade. The tradition of critical thought and theory associated with the Frankfurt School only goes so far in mapping out the roadmaps for the politics of consumption in the case of fair trade. This tradition, akin to Bauman, has negated the very act of consumption as infused with the poisonous qualities of hedonism, selfishness and flaccid reactions to consumer culture. The cynicism which has addressed the fair trade movement does not come from a critical perspective on the detriment of the political core of the cause, but has predominantly arisen from neoliberal conservative agents who have denigrated the movement's developmental work (cf. Mohan, 2010). But while fair trade is not a panacea to free trade, it cannot be rejected outright because of its employment of the consumer as a categorical agent of change. It has awakened the sense of responsibility in the average consumer (as evident through surveys in the UK) and hosted the opportunity for small change and political expression which both indifferent and interested citizens have embraced.

At the same time, the phenomenon of ethical consumption allows citizens to believe they are engaging in a political act through which they voice their preference towards a fair model of trade, but not necessarily their opposition to the current model of free trade. A question addressing the relationship between fair trade and free trade was confusing to interviewees. There is reluctance

1 There is No Alternative.

around fair trade vis-à-vis free trade – citizens are not economic experts capable of meaningfully assessing the two models, but they understand a simple narrative or 'normative conclusion' (Polletta, 2006) which suggests, for instance, that the more fair trade coffee you buy, the more coffee farmers benefit. But while they were confused about the real economic relationships and impact of fair trade, at the same time they were assured about the right to expression granted by fair trade consumption:

> I'd say I'm more kind of active as a consumer, that's how I show, demonstrate, my commitment to fair trade... Since ten to fifteen years or something I've always bought fair trade when it was available and always tried to buy sugar, coffee, tea all that kind of stuff. And, also, I always wondered why it was for such a long time such a narrow area and why should it only be coffee and tea that's fair trade? Bananas should be [fair trade], every vegetable, every fruit, every flower. (Emily)

The issues attached to a politics of fair trade consumption relate to the perseverance of market logic and the non-perseverance of combined civic and consumer agency. A macroscopic critique which would deal with consumer politics needs to delve in the exploration of the structural dynamics characterising the growth of that particular politics in relation to the everyday practices at the bottom of a very unstable pyramid. The rise of trust in consumers through commercial symbols exists at a battleground for consumer attention where stronger more established agents usurp nascent agents and where consumer behaviour is adaptable to individual needs (cf. Gereffi, 1994; Raynolds, 2009; Lekakis, forthcoming). This is evident in the success of the Fairtrade label which is the official certificate and brand of the Fairtrade Foundation (and organised movement) which overshadows products which do not carry this specific label. The arguments for the existence of one unifying label naturally adhere to standards of product reliability, however by doing so are increasing a market-based thinking to the process of fair trade participation. This propels fair trade consumption closer to the engine of neoliberalism. Most importantly, an exploration of consumer critique with a focus on the politics of consumption must include the understanding that liquid modernity is a continuation of solid modernity and as such contains elements, agents, strategies and audiences from that tradition which have been forged in the rituals and practices of a continuous, committed and mindful past.

The idea that the market is a mechanism which provides citizens with choices and outlets for expression through consumption is directly linked to the political repertoires of neoliberalism (Schmookler, 1993). In this sense, fair trade consumption does not present citizens with a clearly defined political goal. Ethical consumerism is more frequently than not viewed as a legitimate and politically charged arena, where their 'economic votes' can be cast. The

celebration of ethical consumerism as a politically valid act should not be swiftly related to economic voting. When it does, it belongs to the repertoires of economism and 'banal cosmopolitanism' (Beck, 2002). Marketplace democracy exists within the legitimation of a neoliberal replacing of a political space with a commercial space. Neoliberalism has been pushing towards a shift of the political process from political structures to market structures, as the state grows weaker and the market stronger. This is particularly evident in the case of fair trade consumption where the levels of trust and behaviour have moved from the political process of engaging with political parties or organisations to engaging in supermarket consumption. Despite the interviewees' commitment to voting, the larger picture of UK citizens disproves the sustenance of trust and engagement with political institutions. Therefore, although it is tentative, in comparison to gaseous modernity which renders the possibility of commitment impossible, liquid modernity is a more viable avenue for understanding the changes in the social fabric.

Furthermore, cultural (consumer and cosmopolitan) citizenship in this case is stamped by individualisation, flexibility and politically debilitating consumerism. Individualisation in consumer citizenship and beyond exists as the quiet reconstruction of citizens as 'self-interested disparate individuals' (Root, 2007: 36). Individual acts of consumer citizenship are ephemeral and conditional as they are imagined as collective and emotionally coupled. In this sense, the breakage of the solid bonds between institutions and citizens, as well as those between citizens as a collective body politic fuels the fluidity of liquid politics. The potential solid politics of fair trade consumption need to be anchored in a political agenda which is clearly connected with further action beyond consumption and a sustained effort to wash against the waves of liquid politics as fragmented, individualised and divorced from promise. A constructive macroscopic critique can elucidate the opportunities for progressive politics which can stem from the employment of the category of the consumer, but are translated rhetorically to clear targets.

A model of liquid politics fits the politics of fair trade consumption in so far as it can explain the precariousness which characterises political engagement and the excitement that characterises successful ethical consumption formats. Perhaps a choice in employing Bauman's grammar in questioning this particular politics of consumption poses a bias in terms of the political empowerment that a large number of people in the United Kingdom are demonstrating, as Bauman senses a coercion of market mentality and orientation. However, at the same time, this model appears particularly fitting in interpreting consumer participation where there is political insecurity and lack of cohesion in political articulations, multi-modal citizenship roles and cosmopolitan orientations in the sense of everyday

consumption. The real structural questions that frame liquid politics concern the degrees of solid and political commitment (i.e. the ability to express and support a cause through the marketplace and beyond) and the resistance to market logic which dictates the rules of the game (i.e. buy this and you can change the world). A consumer politics in liquid modernity can enable insights into situations where consumption might be one of the few opportunities for political engagement with a cause, but also disable the articulation of that political engagement by providing the assumption that this would be enough.

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