

Thought for Food; Ethical and fair-trade consumption and production.

Introduction

Food is a multidisciplinary concern and has been researched for decades. It can be understood by anthropologists as a symbolic system of meaning, therefore food is both a structured and a structuring force within the social sphere (Bourdieu, 1979). Within the last decade especially, there has been a rise in consumers within wealthy capitalist nations, renegotiating what they purchase as foodstuffs and how they are consuming these foods considering socialist movements such as Fairtrade and ethical consumption. The concept of 'ethical consumption' is a term that has come to the forefront of mainstream Western media outlets and the food market place. In turn people are becoming increasingly conscious of the way in which their consumption may be playing a part in environmental, social, and political problems for those living in the regions, from which the food is produced and exported.

This paper will seek to outline this growing trend of the 'ethical consumer' and how this may have affected the wider socio-political terrain in which the food goods have been cultivated, produced and exported. This paper will borrow Barnett et al's (2005) definition of 'ethical consumption' to be the 'practice of consumption in which explicitly registering commitment to distant or absent others is an important dimension of the meaning of activity of the actors involved' (Barnett et al, 2005). This is a broad definition of ethical consumption, which lends itself to the topic at hand as ethical consumption can be applied to all aspects of consumption, not just foods but things such as fashion, goods and cosmetics can also be analysed through this definition.

When looking at the politics of food, Humphrey (2011) has pointed out that, the mass food market has been a complex subject that has probed cultural and political critique by Marxist, Liberals and conservatives alike (Humphrey, 2011). This is due to the myriad of issues the production and consumption of food has created for many communities and landscapes, particularly in the global South.

Conceptualising Ethical foodscapes and Ethical Consumption.

In Goodman's et al paper 'Ethical Foodscapes' (2010) the authors trace the discourses that are entangled in the production and consumption of food. Looking closely at the geographical environments involved in the production-consumption relations. To conceptualise and engage in the issues surrounding ethical consumption and the current socio-political positionality of the production-consumption relationship, Goodman et al (2010) introduces the idea of 'ethical foodscapes'. This concept according the Goodman et al (2010) allows researchers to critically analyse the process, politics, spaces and places in which the implications of food provisioning come to light (Goodman et al, 2010). There is also room through this form of investigation to shed new light on the ethical relationships that have been imbedded and produced through this process of producing and consuming foods. Goodman et al (2010) also points to the power of researching 'ethical foodscapes' as a tool

for dissecting the global power relations and political manifestation of the North and South divide.

Seyfang (2005) comments on this consumer behaviour too, asserting that sustainable consumption through ethical means is about placing the 'blame' or moral responsibility in the consumers hands. This in turn, he believes will then create new forms of 'ecological citizenship'. However, he also highlights how this may be problematic, as this is not something that is accessible or attainable to all, then causing further divide between production and consumption relations along with racial and social divides within wealthy capitalist nations (Seyfang, 2005).

There are further critiques raised by this new wave of 'ethical consumers'. Lockie (2013) explores some of the problems in 'Bastions of white privilege? Reflections on the racialisation of alternative food networks'. Where he argues that focus thus far within the subject of ethical consumption through alternative food networks has ignored or failed to acknowledge the racial inequalities that are entangled within the existing institutions, social practices and geographies. These food networks may then unknowingly reproduce the same inequities, therefore Lockie (2013) urges scholars to move towards a more focused analysis of the way social inclusions and exclusions are produced through this process.

Similarly, Appadurai (1986) suggests we might study the 'social life of things'. Through this we may trace food through its various entanglements, across boundaries both legal and moral, beyond and between nations, bodies, persons and nutrients. This given us a more holistic understanding of the social, economic, and environmental impacts that food has within the human experience and its many complexities. Fair trade produce aims to make visible the multiple actors that are at play within the complex decentralised production process, to re-moralise market mechanisms (Brown 1993: 156). Food in these terms is consumed as a self-expression of morality.

Conclusion

Through this conceptualisation, food is then an important medium through which anthropologists can trace the socio-political implications of both globalisation and food produced-consumption relations. By doing so we can shed new light on the complexity and mediatisation of 'ethical consumption' and give thought for food. This research will enable anthropologists to make known and raise consumers consciousness regarding the process behind the food we eat. Leading to a more transparent relationship between producers in the South and consumers in the North. By deconstructing the processes of production, the ideological assumptions as well as political and economic arrangements on which they are built will be revealed to the consumer. Although it is evident that this may not fully fix the multiple entangled inequities that are recognised within the food production process, it may however implement some form of consumer responsibility. In other words, by consumers opting for fair-trade food stuffs through reconceptualising themselves as a 'ethical consumer' they could be viewed as resisting in some sense the consumer market, by becoming a member of this counter market economy. This process will also help to transpose commodity

fetishism, by attempting to create a 'familiarity' with the producer (Hudson and Hudson, 2003).

The limitations are evident within the 'ethical consumer' ideology and within the Fairtrade market, as it may be argued that although consumers are attempting to renegotiate themselves outside the mainstream market place by consuming foods that are Fairtrade certified, to limit the inequalities at play within the production process, they are still entangled in a consumer driven market that prices goods at a higher cost for this heightened sense of morality. In today's ever changing globalised economy, it would be more beneficial for all food commodities to be reconceptualised under this ethical framework, which will allow Fairtrade goods to be more accessible to everyone.

Word Count: 1074

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