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9 CONCLUSION: FAIR TRADE AND MORAL ECONOMIES

What makes trade fair? Case studies from different parts of the world suggest that producers, cooperative managers and alternative-trade organisations have a range of commitments and agendas.¹²⁹ Consumers, too, have their own ideas and expectations about fair-trade goods. Because shoppers stand at a distance from production and distribution it would be easy to dismiss them as dupes of cleverly marketed commodities, but this would ignore the sentiments people themselves believe they express when buying fair trade. On the other hand, it cannot be right to automatically champion the opposing and romantic view and depict ethically motivated consumers as heroically resisting and subverting the dominant economic order (Miller, D. 1995c; Mills 1997:41).

Despite evidence that different parties have a range of purposes with respect to fair trade, there are grounds for thinking that participants share assumptions and ideas about ethics in the economy. Of particular concern in this chapter are Euro-American ideas, although parallels may be found in other religious, cultural and intellectual traditions.¹³⁰ To interrogate the moral notions that people hold with regard to their relations with things or their commitments to human relationships as mediated by objects, I draw upon central themes within economic anthropology and the history of economic thought. Of course, ethnographic data from one Central American country cannot claim to be representative of the way all fair-trade deals across the globe operate. The point is that the idea of fair trade has attracted many people over time within Western culture.

The key referent in that attraction is the dominant order; fair trade defines itself and only has meaning when framed against the capitalist economy. Market capitalism draws on the metaphor of an invisible hand that guides outcomes and determines our economic fortunes. Because the economy is impersonal, it offers a specific notion of moral responsibility; for it to function properly the only economic imperative is self-interest. In looking after ourselves and disregarding the needs of others, it is thought, we promote general economic growth and, paradoxically, benefit everyone. It is an ethic

of personal achievement and merit that has come to be synonymous with the profit motive. The principal way that righteous self-interest can be advanced in the capitalist model is through buying products as cheaply as possible and selling them on at a higher price. Often this takes the form of purchasing wage labour and selling the surplus produced by workers for a profit. Because the aim is to make profit through exchange, the specific qualities that we value objects for are reduced to a general equivalence, expressed in money. So exponents of the impartial market propose one answer to the question of what makes trade fair. They argue it provides everyone with equal opportunity. The morality lies in the impersonality; it is fair because everyone is treated the same at a formal level.

An alternative voice challenges the ethics of the market by pointing out that it ignores social processes.¹³¹ According to this second view, formal equality is no way to run economic affairs since it masks the different endowments and capacities people bring to the marketplace. Instead, critics say, we need to look at the real-life effects of the market on people's everyday lives (Barth 1997). For many people fair trade means opposing depersonalised economic relations, objecting to 'middle-men' concerned only with making profits, and decrying a modern economy in which all things take the generic commodity form. In its place, in the Western imagination, stands an economy based upon personal relationships, where the producer and the consumer know one another, or are the same person; a world where value is imparted to objects by transforming them in meaningful and creative activities; where people through their actions make and appreciate things for their specific qualities and usefulness. In this view fair trade presents an image of the economy in which we look beyond value for money to consider the social context within which things are made, and the role these things play in sustaining meaningful human relationships. What is useful and fascinating about rural Costa Rica is that the idea of a moral political economy remains real and immediate; it is based upon living from a divinely ordered nature with the aim of household reproduction from farming so that economic relations assume the form of personal relationships with nature, with the things produced and with other people. Listening to *campesinos* opens up the debate and reinforces the popular conviction that alternative conversations on the economy remain possible.

This chapter locates the attractions of fair-trade products within a broad political spectrum. For those on the left it is a discussion about exploitation, the power of multinationals and political calls for trade justice. The framework for such analyses derives from Marxist political economy, from where it has been incorporated into value-chain analysis (Daviron and Ponte 2005). It builds upon a negative picture in which capitalists control the means of production and

distribution, and exploit workers by appropriating surplus value. Costa Rican coffee cooperatives similarly justify their existence by reference to farmers who are marginalised and impoverished in the capitalist system; giving producers a share in ownership of the means of production was designed to cut out the appropriation of profit by intermediaries who control coffee processing and marketing, and to curb dissent. Pragmatic steps of this kind are underpinned by the conviction that value comes from productive activity, so that a just return should go to the producer. For peasant farmers in Costa Rica value is the result of their labour in God-given nature, a standpoint that informs their suspicion of intermediaries of all kinds, and takes them close to the secular position adopted by Marx.

These ideas, and the image of independent, autonomous producers they imply, feed into a less specifically political agenda that has broad cultural appeal. Fair-trade products (as well as many other 'alternative' and mainstream commodities) are characterised by unease about the separation of production and consumption, and the associated processes of alienation and fetishisation that Marx identified in capitalism (Slater 1997). Imagine a world without that separation. In the first place, it implies a particular and romantic relationship with nature, and a specific relation to ourselves. In an idealised world we take things from a giving natural environment, which provides us with all that we need. In the Christian tradition Eden, before the fall, is exemplary. However, since creating livelihoods entails labour, the privileged circuit would be to consume directly the things we produce, and for us to control the means to that end. This tradition would privilege certain forms of production: artisan modes, petty commodity production and peasant farming. Lastly, the necessity of labour compromises our ability to live directly from nature so the aforementioned production regimes involve relations with other people. The idea that economic ethics entail social, cultural and moral relations between persons has been pursued in anthropology since the early days of Malinowski and Mauss. In contrast to alienation and fetishisation, social and moral relationships are, at least in the Western imagination, established and activated through the idea of connecting production to consumption.

Directly appropriating from nature and producing the things we consume, or the exchange of products between people in social relationships achieves two things. Firstly, it cuts out intermediaries and negates the separation of people from one another, a state usually associated with capitalism but now exacerbated by globalisation (Giddens 1990; Harvey 1989; Appadurai 1990). Secondly, it allows people to realise the value of the things they consume as qualities that derive from nature and from the work put into them. Of course, in the act of consuming things we always realise that objects have qualities,

and this is tellingly so in the case of food. But that is precisely the point. Fair-trade goods such as coffee are not just associated with small producers and unstable markets; they are also overtly sensuous and exotic products.

This chapter moves from a focus on production and producers to look at exchange and distribution, and then to finally deal with consumption and the concerns of consumers. Throughout it can be seen that, in keeping with their interests, the parties emphasise different aspects, but since fair trade is embedded in complex and evolving Western notions of the economy and morality there are also significant areas of overlap. I begin by emphasising the importance of creative activity in transforming nature as the origin of value in much Euro-American thought. Producers, according to one view, realise themselves through labour when they retain the full value they have created. In the following section on commodity production I show how in Marxist thought this privileged avenue for creating value is understood as compromised, because the capitalist appropriates the surplus created by labour. The next part concentrates on the experience of producers under capitalism of separation, known as alienation or estrangement. Marx identified four kinds of alienation in capitalism; from the product of labour, from the activity of production, from our 'species life' as creative beings, and from each other. I then explore attempts to culturally subvert the experience of estrangement in the Western imagination through idealised forms of economic activity. In particular, I refer to peasant household production, localised forms of exchange in which the purpose is to redistribute rather than make a profit, and the promotion of social and moral relationships through gift exchange. Whereas reciprocal exchanges and mutuality are given local importance by producers in Costa Rica, it is only consumers who, as powerful choosers, extend gift ideology across the globe to try to embrace disadvantaged coffee growers, a morality that I see as inspirational to new forms of politicised consumption. In the final section I note that certain goods, such as coffee and tea, are especially powerful reminders of our sensory attachment to the world. For this reason they are more obvious vehicles for critical consumption than other goods.

Coffee quality can be understood in at least two senses. Firstly it manifests itself in the physical attributes of a product from a particular place cultivated in certain ways. This emphasis on the diverse character of coffees and the cultivation of taste marks a departure from the generic, standardised product promoted until the 1980s, and marks a return to an earlier colonial model of descriptive language used by roasters and exporters to distinguish coffee types and places of origin (Neilson 2004).¹³² Secondly, and particularly with regard to fair trade, quality comes to be associated with specific

ways of life and idealised relationships: peasant production, the family and the autonomous space known as the household. Here the activities of production and consumption come together in the guise of reproduction and take on the semblance, at least, of unalienated activity. Here also we like to imagine our economic exchanges to entail selfless acts of giving. These observations provide a route to consider moral ideas on the economy and what attracts us to the message on the tin of coffee – ‘from the culture of small producers’ – with which I opened this book.

NATURE, VALUE AND CREATIVE ACTIVITY

Ethical ideas attached to ways of life in El Dos begin with nature. In part this is because work on nature provides a timescale for the settlement of the Tilarán Highlands. The stories told of the early years evoke ‘pure nature’, and this provides a reference point for changes in the landscape and the complex modern world in which people now must live. Christian ideas provide the foundation for social, moral and political commitments in the mundane world, for in imagining nature people draw on the religious motif of a divinely created and bounteous environment, exemplified by Eden, and instigated by God for human benefit. The biblical precedent comes from Genesis, a world where acts of production involved picking the fruit of nature and consuming it; the world of toil, inequality and suffering came after the fall. Nature is conceived of as a force that gives humans sustenance, ideally in a direct and unmediated fashion, with people living directly from the land. Crops are grown and turned into food, to consume and to give strength to work in agriculture. In this way *campesinos* consider nature as the origin of value for themselves and their families, and they rightfully access that value through productive activity.

By formulating nature as the origin of value, *campesinos* are participants in a ‘conversation’, to borrow the term used by Gudeman and Rivera (1990), with an extended history. There is a remarkable similarity between the ideas of Latin American *campesinos*, the strand of political philosophy that can be traced back to John Locke, and the doctrine of the eighteenth-century French political economists known as the physiocrats, most commonly represented by Quesnay (Gudeman and Rivera 1990:30–37). Both the physiocrats and Locke, like the people of El Dos, and in common with Christian and Catholic doctrine, stress the sanctity of private property and the right to freedom from regulation or state interference (Dumont 1977:42; Tully 1993). Perhaps this is not surprising, given they all subscribe to versions of natural-law theory. Central to this is the emphasis upon land, or more precisely the earth, as the source of wealth.

The political implications are obvious. Marx may have objected to the 'physiocratic illusion that rents grow out of the soil and not out of society' (2000:480), but by arguing that agriculture was the only properly productive activity, the physiocrats laid foundations for political economy. In 1772 Paoletti illustrated the primacy of agriculture. Give a cook some peas, he said, and they will be served up in the same quantity; give them to a gardener and they will be returned four-fold (Bradley and Howard 1982:4). For this reason the physiocrats considered agriculture the origin of surplus, while manufacturing and commerce were seen as sterile activities. The idea that rights are established by work in nature was a key theme in the political philosophy of John Locke. He argued that humans have a right to 'Meat and Drink, and such other things, as Nature affords for their subsistence'. What is more, by the act of appropriation through the exertion of labour power the common is divided up into individual possessions (Tully 1993:27). The Ricardian socialist John Francis Bray, in 'Labour's Wrong's and Labour's Remedy' (1839), echoes the right to minimum subsistence demanded by peasantries (Scott 1976). He proposed that since it was a 'natural law' that the 'raw material of all wealth – the earth – is the common property of all its inhabitants', then everyone was due equal rights (Jay and Jay 1986:31). We saw in the previous chapter how *campesinos* privilege their work in nature as the source of value and make political and economic claims on this basis; Smith, Ricardo and, most famously, Marx also worked within the same frame of reference, and used it to develop their various elaborations of labour value.¹³³

In discussions of the labour theory of value many commentators move immediately to the problem of surplus, profit-taking and the capitalist form of production. Of course, as discussed below, Marx did use labour value as the basis of his critique of the capitalist economy, but it is nevertheless also true that the human relationship with nature is the underlying philosophical idea that informs his position. Two projects emerge here; the first is concerned with revealing the operations of capitalism, the taking of profit, exploitation and the appropriation of the surplus value created by labour. The second imagines and appeals to alternative social forms. Marx is generally recognised to have made a significant headway in the first task but to have failed in providing a coherent model of the communist society he envisioned as imminent in the historical process.

By placing productive activity at the centre of his political economy, Marx, like the people of El Dos, emphasises the relationship between humans and nature. Both are committed to the idea that the mediation between humans and their environment takes place through productive activity. For Marx, this provides the foundations for the materialist conception of history; through productive activity

people alter nature and in the process transform both themselves and their relations with others. Marx continuously emphasises the central role of nature in the creation of value. He considered the earth our 'original larder' and 'tool house' (2000:494; see Ortiz 1979), but he was centrally concerned with instrumentality and the human capacity to appropriate nature and act on an externally given world in order to change it (2000:493).¹³⁴ The language that Marx uses echoes that of *campesinos* who consider themselves dependent upon and part of the natural order, but who also understand that agricultural production requires them to negotiate the agency of nature; in this work they can hardly help but notice that they have an impact upon their environment and alter it.

It is helpful at this point to follow Arthur (1986), and consider two kinds of mediation. In the first people engage in productive activity and through this their relationship to nature and with each other is transformed. No necessary connection is made with actually existing societies; rather a philosophical point is made about the way humans create a material world around them and in the process change themselves. A second-level mediation occurs when work on nature takes a particular historical form, manifest in the social arrangements within which creative activities recreate specific circumstances:

In the present economic conditions we find that productive activity itself is mediated through the division of labour, private property, exchange, wages, in sum a system of estrangement in which productive activity loses itself and falls under the sway of an alien power (Arthur 1986:11).

Here, of course, we are talking specifically about capitalism. The principal difference between the two forms of mediation is that in the first it is imagined that productive activity is realised as self-expression, with the producer in 'immediate unity' with their object; in the second 'labour is immediately confronted by its object as something separate from it' (Arthur 1986:11). In the first case the term 'objectification' describes the situation whereby people contemplate and constitute themselves in the world they have created by transforming nature; in the second, it refers to our engagement with the world through things not of our own making, and so our experience of objects and social relations (as consumers) is characterised by a sense of rupture (Miller 1994:66–67; 1995a:1–2). The clear blue sky I discern between these two kinds of mediation is not, however, always easy to see. Each social formation seems to 'naturalise' its own system of economy and of transforming nature, and this holds for practices underpinned by Christian theology, natural law and market distribution.

In *El Dos*, I have argued, material production and the production of meaning operate within and emerge from a Christian view of nature and divine providence. Rather than being passive, however,

people engage in a struggle with nature and transform it through work. In this creative activity they reproduce themselves and society and make a meaningful world of value around them (Graeber 2001; Hirsch 2004; Slater 1997). I suggest that this takes us closer to the Marxian model than Gudeman and Rivera allow. To argue that Marx worked with the folk model of labour power and used a secular version for the purpose of picking apart the economic workings of capitalism is important, but it is not the whole story (Gudeman and Rivera 1990:104).

To develop the argument we must hold on to the idea that Marx envisioned a world in which the producer directly appropriates the product of labour, in effect reproducing a central motif in Western thought that privileges economic forms based upon an unmediated link between producers and consumers, or acts of production and moments of consumption, since this avoids the appropriation of value created by labour by capitalist intermediaries. At the same time, or as part of this project, Marx set about revealing actual relations of production between capitalists and workers, relations which overshadow and distort preferred avenues for creative activity. Before moving on to outline idealised economic activity in Euro-American cultural life, we first need to look at the critique of capitalist production against which these preferred economic relationships, as social relations, take shape, retain meaning and are activated and imagined.

COMMODITY PRODUCTION

As we have learnt, farmers experience their relationship with nature, with the market and with the labour process as uncertain, and they have a specific vocabulary to express this. But they also make more explicitly moral adjudications about the economics of capitalism and their engagement with markets as characterised by exploitation. I have argued that their justification lies in the labour theory of value, their creative activity in nature. Intermediaries, by contrast, appropriate the greater part of the profit and yet do not 'work'; they live from buying and selling and not by creatively extracting value directly from the natural world through manual labour. Marx's critique of capitalism worked upon related though secular lines. To expose the way capitalist production was organised and the social and ontological problems the system raised he also made recourse to the labour theory of value.

Marx saw that capitalist production is geared towards creating commodities, but that to have exchange value things must also be useful, or have a 'use-value'.¹³⁵ Whereas use-values are cherished for their qualities and the purposes to which they can be put, commodities are valued as quantities, measured against the amount

of other commodities for which they might be exchanged. Typically, the medium for comparison is money. The attractiveness and power of money lies in its ability to act as stored value, as a quantity and as a vehicle for the representation of choices yet to be made. But there are some useful things, like air or goods we produce for personal consumption, which cannot be bought or sold 'for love nor money'. Some of the most useful of things do not have exchange value at all, so the value of commodities cannot be said to have any relation to their intrinsic properties as useful things. What, then, is the criterion upon which we base the 'fair' value of something as an exchangeable object if not its usefulness? To answer this question Marx adapted the physiocratic and *campesino* notion of value residing in nature and extracted by human work, and said that the value we place on different commodities is based upon the relative amounts of aggregate human labour that has gone into creating them (Fine 1975:20–21; Graeber 2001:55).

To reveal the workings of capitalism, Marx then distinguished between labour and labour-power, or the capacity to work and produce. Under capitalism, labour-power becomes a commodity that the worker sells for a wage. For their part, capitalists purchase labour-power as a useful thing in return for money. Because this is an exchange, labour-power is also a commodity; the use-value being bought and sold is the capacity to produce further use-values. So capitalists buy labour-power as a commodity and use it to produce other commodities that can be sold for an amount of money greater than that paid to the worker. In this way capitalists, depending on one's point of view, 'create' or 'appropriate' surplus value. They can do this because they own the means of production – tools, machinery and raw materials – that the worker needs and uses to produce. So, as is well known, Marx sees capitalism as a social relationship in which capitalists monopolise the means of production and use it to exploit wage earners and extract surplus from them.

The connection between this view of the economy and fair trade lies in the exploitation identified in exchange relations. At a macro level, and according to the kinds of analysis offered by world systems theory and Latin American dependency theory, 'core' capitalist countries systematically exploit and underdevelop 'peripheral' ones. Typically, they do this by purchasing raw materials cheaply and adding value in the industrial stages to sell at a profit. The coffee industry presents a particular problem because of the complexity of processing. To produce quality coffee requires expensive machinery that has long allowed dynasties of elite coffee families in Costa Rica and transnational companies to dominate the market, both in producing countries and in the North, where the toasting, freeze-drying and marketing is typically carried out. So although coffee

farmers do have land, and so own one part of the necessary means of production as private property, they are excluded from the industrial and marketing sides of the coffee business. It is in these phases that the surplus is extracted, and it is this problem that cooperatives attempt to circumvent. As is often emphasised, producers typically receive a very small percentage of the final value of their crop (Gresser and Tickell 2002:24). Information of this kind does not often refer explicitly to the appropriation of surplus value, but we are indebted to the ghost of Marx in such analyses.

Compare this approach to orthodox economic models. It is customary in neo-classical economics to locate the value of commodities in supply and demand; how much of a given thing is available and the desire it excites in consumers, measured by the amount of money they are willing to spend on it. Marx followed Ricardo in rejecting this as the source of value. As a dynamic model, supply and demand could perhaps explain price fluctuations, but when prices are stable, Marx and Ricardo argued, it explains nothing at all (Bradley and Howard 1982:9). The shortcomings of supply and demand as a price-fixing mechanism are further exposed by 'real world' practices. Although they can easily be represented as an aggregate of choices freely made by individual subjects, powerful interests easily manipulate both. For example, it is quite possible to stimulate demand among consumers by raising prices. What is more, prices often have little relation to actual supplies or existing levels of demand; they are much more a reflection of subsidies, tariffs and price-fixing strategies. In recent years the more politicised application of the fair-trade concept, usually voiced as 'trade justice', has been promoted by activists, both secular and religious, and by the media. Part of the power of 'trade justice' as an idea is that the rejection of subsidies to Western farmers can appeal politically to those on the left concerned at the effects on the livelihoods of the rural poor in the South, and those on the right who object to any distortion of the 'level playing field' of the market.

A second set of foundational ideas in the neoclassical model is that profit is taken and deserved because of risk-taking, the burden of decision-making, the abstinence required to hoard profit for investment, and innovation (Fine 1975:31–32; Kaplinsky 2000:122). Again, for Marxists these things might be a condition for profit, factors that determine the way it is distributed and the means for it to be accumulated by capitalists, but they are not its source. I have demonstrated that coffee farmers also take risks, make decisions, practise thrift and innovate. These practices can determine how much is retained, but they are not, they believe, where value comes from.

As can be seen, the idea that exploitation occurs in exchange because owners of the means of production appropriate the differential

between the value created by labour and the amount paid as a wage has had broader application. Much of the rhetoric of fair trade is based upon political economy of this kind. The opening chapters of this book showed that to participate in fair trade, producer groups are required to project an image of themselves as peripheral, poor, disadvantaged and in need of largesse to counteract the iniquities of the world trading system. So macroeconomic arrangements designed to extract surplus establish the conditions that make alternative trading arrangements both necessary and possible.

The above is common currency in analyses of the coffee industry. It is, for example, used to good effect by scholars interested in the distribution of value down the chain, an approach that derives from world systems theory (Daviron and Ponte 2005; Fold and Pritchard 2005; Hughes and Reimer 2004). The focus on the extraction of surplus provides the broader political and economic framework against which fair trade operates, but it does not grapple with more social and cultural aspects. It addresses how it proceeds, and what it is a reaction to, but tells us little about why the concept appeals to us as a cultural model and about the idioms it uses to attract shoppers. To begin to engage with that problem I make recourse to Marx's work on the effects of capitalism on our experience of the world. For Marx, the commodification of labour does not only have material effects. A second outcome is that human creative activity in nature, as a transformational project of self-realisation, is distorted. That distortion, whereby workers are excluded from the means of production and from the product of their labour, leads to a condition known as estrangement or alienation and a specific relationship with things as fetishised objects.

COMMODITY FETISHISM, ESTRANGEMENT AND ALIENATION

Raymond Williams gives two main meanings of alienation. Firstly, it is a process of cutting off, or being cut off, either from God, or from other people, as a result of a breakdown in social relations. Secondly, it has a legalistic meaning relating to the transference of rights in property, especially by force (1988:33). Williams notes that there is often a loss of distinction between the two usages. Marx in particular is singled out as combining the two senses:

In Marx the process is seen as the history of labour, in which man creates himself by creating his world, but in a class-society is *alienated* from this essential nature by specific forms of *alienation* in the division of labour, private property and the capitalist mode of production in which the worker loses both the product of his labour and his sense of his own productive activity, following the expropriation of both by capital. The world man has made

confronts him as stranger and enemy, having power over him who transferred his power to it (1988:35, emphasis in original).

The general sense of estrangement is the product of a specific historical process of separation of the worker from the means of production, through the institution of private property. In the *1844 Manuscripts* Marx identifies four aspects to alienation: people are alienated from the product of their labour, from their 'life activity', from their 'species-being', and from other people. Each form of alienation relates to the others, but all are consequent upon the specific form that the separation of workers from their product takes in capitalism.¹³⁶

Firstly, due to private property, 'the worker relates to the product of his labour as to an alien object' (Marx 2000:87). Because of the transference of ownership workers are 'doubly deprived'; they are denied their right to be subjects creatively reproducing themselves in the material world, and they become slaves to the things that they do produce. People exist as workers and as physical subjects only through objects (2000:89). So although the production of things takes place through specific social and labour relations, these relationships only find expression in and through the commodities. To capture this idea that people enact their social relationships through the objects they produce, Marx turned to the religious idiom of the fetish; an icon created by people but then accorded the power to control human affairs. Marx famously explained the process by which commodities become fetishised in the following way:

[a] commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour (2000:473).

In the first the worker as subject is separated (alienated) from the object, in the second the object gains 'mystical power' over people. Instead of finding satisfaction in and through creative work, we do so through commodities that unknown people have produced, and our relationship to those products and to other people through them comes to replace and substitute real social relations. It is a moot point whether this tendency for people to live and express relationships through objects is a feature of all societies and whether this is a general condition (Graeber 2001; 2005). Certainly Marx particularly associated it with capitalism because of the total separation of the worker and the product under this system. The second area in which alienation is experienced is the activity of production. Marx relates this to alienation from the product: '[h]ow would the worker be able

to affront the product of his work as an alien being if he did not alienate himself in the act of production itself?' (2000:88). Because workers do not realise themselves in their work they avoid it 'like the plague'; work becomes a compulsory and external activity, in as much as it is not owned by the worker but by the employer. The third aspect of alienation refers to human 'species-life'. This relates to productive activity as a process whereby through creative action people transform nature and in so doing transform themselves. For Marx this vital and conscious human activity constitutes our 'species-being'. Alienated labour alienates humans from their 'species-life' and reduces it to the means to individual physical existence. The consequence of the previous three aspects of alienation in capitalist society leads to the fourth; social relations are also alienated relations. When people are alienated from the product of their labour, from their activity as producers, and from their 'species-being', they are also alienated from other people. They relate to others from their position as workers and producers of commodities rather than fully realised human beings.

The people of El Dos do not speak of alienation and fetishisation, but they are constantly troubled by the possibility of being cut off from or losing God, by the breakdown of social ties and by the form their relations with objects takes. Many identified the root cause of this threat in the market economy and were troubled by its effects on social life. Firstly, we can see this in their concern that people give undue importance to material possessions, expressed through *consumismo*. Secondly, *campesinos* stress the importance of owning and working land; when to go to work for a wage is described as 'going to be shackled' (*ir al brete*) and there is no suggestion of labour as a liberating activity in which workers realise their 'species-being'. Finally, the depreciation of *egoismo* is based on the idea that individual self-interest and the denial of moral responsibility to others dissolves social relations.

To recapitulate, we have seen that Marx stressed productive activity as the means by which humans transform nature, themselves and society. Under capitalism, private property, wages and the division of labour mediate productive activity. The consequence is a system of estrangement, in which potentially liberating creative practices become distorted, and alienating activities. On the one hand there is the promise of an ideal state, a vision of a world in which people are in immediate unity with nature, with themselves, the things they create and each other. Against this, we have the idea that under current circumstances we are separated from the goods we produce, cut off from our true natures as human beings and divorced from one another as we relate through objects we did not create.

PEASANT PRODUCTION, SUBSISTENCE, USES AND EXCHANGES

To negate the 'mystery', 'magic' and 'necromancy' of commodities Marx conjures up the image of Robinson Crusoe, alone on his island. All the things that the castaway does to satisfy his wants – tool-making, fishing, hunting and such like – are directly produced by him: 'so the relations between Robinson and the objects that form this wealth of his own creation are here so simple and clear as to be intelligible without exertion ... yet those relations contain all that is essential to the determination of value' (2000:477). In the iconic figure of the shipwrecked hero Marx glimpses an escape from the fetishism of commodities and alienation because there is no separation between producer and consumer, since they are one and the same person. Crusoe appropriates the total value of the things he produces in the act of consuming them.

The residents of El Dos are similarly attracted to collecting and freely distributing food, particularly fruit, that grows 'naturally' and in abundance without the application of human labour or material inputs. Other foods are produced and then consumed as items 'for use' (*por el gasto*) by the household. Farm visits nearly always involved a demonstration of the variety and range of crops grown for subsistence and the animals kept for meat, milk or eggs. Often people lamented a move away from production for consumption and reliance on store-bought food, shipped into nearby towns by container trucks. As we saw in Chapter 6, collecting food from nature or producing *por el gasto* has a telling accompanying gesture. The hand brought up to the mouth makes a circle; what the arm produces by working in nature returns to the mouth and brings with it the sustenance for further work. Here we have a symbolic expression of the economy in which individuals provision themselves directly by extracting things for use from the world around them.

However, Marx realised that every economic relation is also a social relation – Crusoe had his Friday – and in the same passage he discusses two noncapitalist forms organised around economic dependency between people. The first is feudal society. Marx contrasts this with capitalism, not because feudalism was non-exploitative, but because 'the social relations of individuals in performance of their labour appear at all events as their own mutual personal relations, and are not disguised under the shape of social relations between the products of labour' (2000:477). That is, goods are not fetishised and economic relations are first and foremost social relations, albeit of an exploitative kind. In the second case Marx uses the peasant family as an example of directly associated labour. Here production as a social relation is a function of the family; individual labour power is part of the overall labour power of the family and so its

social character is stamped upon it. But he objected to the peasant household because he saw it as patriarchal, historically regressive and inefficient, and he rejected ownership of personal private property since under capitalism it presupposes and results in the alienation of labour from the product.

In pursuing his political agenda and critiquing the operations and effects of the capitalist system, Marx was not, in spite of his adherence to the materialist conception of history, concerned with how everyday and scholarly ideas were transformed to accommodate the capitalist transition, as, for example, Dumont (1977) and Tawney (1938 [1926]) have subsequently been. Committed as he was to an evolutionary model of human history, he was still less inclined to look to the past, to non-Western societies or to Western ideas that lie between the cracks, or beyond the ambit of personal expediency and the desire for profit. Many other writers, however, have followed this path. Instead of exposing the injustices generated by capitalism, as Marx did, they have been concerned with the ways people in various societies have constructed social relations with and through objects.

One important area of debate is the extent to which peasant production operates by a different kind of rationality from the market and the degree to which accounting methods and relationships change as the peasant household becomes enmeshed in market exchanges (Carrier 1995; Gudeman and Rivera 1990; Pratt 1994). James Carrier argues that the house economy is 'an orientation that sees the household as the focus of economic action and that subordinates the economic pursuits of its members to the survival of the house as a social unit' (1995:154). In maintaining that the house is a distinctive domain, an opposition between subsistence activities and exchange operations and the distinction between use-value and exchange-value, are commonly played upon.

In *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, James Scott (1976) argues that an assured though culturally defined subsistence level dominates peasant moral and political thinking. Social arrangements for redistribution and reciprocal relationships help maintain that level, and the demands of landlords, moneylenders or the state are deemed legitimate or illegitimate by making reference to the minimum considered necessary to subsist (1976:10). When the minimum is not forthcoming, Scott argues, peasants revolt. In later work Scott moves away from the 'all or nothing' political model of quiescence or outright rebellion. He argues that peasants engage in low-level, everyday resistance to dominant economic and political forms that draw them away from independent subsistence and reciprocal relationships towards the dependency and exploitation of exchange relations (1985).

Despite some evidence to the contrary (Edelman 1999; Acuña Ortega 1985, 1987), Costa Rican peasantries are often represented as pacific. A materialist explanation for this would refer to the benign welfare state, coupled with fecund nature, which makes a minimum culturally defined subsistence an easily realisable goal. In El Dos, for example, reference is constantly made to an earlier time when people were all equally dependent on the natural world to subsist; the refrain 'everything grows here' is regularly repeated. Material concerns are reinforced by the ideology of formal rural equality, a past in which the right to subsistence was given by God through nature, according to the moral precept that 'the product of the land should be distributed in such a way that all were guaranteed a subsistence niche' (Scott 1976:10). The idea of restraint in seeking personal advantage makes sense within a religious frame that decrees all people are equal before God, who created nature for the general benefit and use of humanity. Such a scheme contests the idea that growth can, or should be, unlimited, or that exchange itself can create wealth. Instead, the limited quantity of goods means any gain must automatically take place at someone else's expense (Foster 1965). A moral economy founded on this basis requires distribution according to socially defined ends, such as need, rather than economic criteria, such as the ability to pay, appropriate or exploit.

As we saw in the previous chapter, for Evers (1994) the opposition between the activity of exchange to accumulate wealth and the distribution of use-value to ensure subsistence results in a dilemma for the trader. Here, the association of subsistence with use-value conjures up its opposite: the exchange value of the commodity form and the appropriation of surplus by intermediaries. Earlier I suggested that fair trade relies upon a sophisticated reading of the market economy and the exploitation that is made possible by the appropriation of surplus value by capitalists. Now we can see that fair trade proffers an antidote to this exploitation by making reference to peasant livelihoods, small farmers and their struggle to survive. For example, a quotation from Miguel Barrantes from Costa Rica states that 'without Cafédirect and fair trade many coffee growers here could not have continued; the price paid by the middlemen was not enough to cover the cost of growing and preparing [coffee]'. Messages such as these are doubly effective in appealing to romantic sensibilities, the persistent attractions of rurality and nationalist identities on both the left and the populist right of the political spectrum (Kearney 1996; Pratt 2003; Roseberry 1989).

But what is really interesting is not the relative use-value of different things, their practical utility or their status as commodities, but cultural distinctions made between goods that serve the same or similar purpose (Sahlins 1976). If, as we have already seen, all

commodities as exchange items must also have use-values, what sense is there to moral differentiations on this basis? A jar of Nescafé and a jar of Cafédirect are both equally useful, and they are both commodities; we make a comparison between them as two similar things, and the difference is cultural, social and symbolic. In this respect we can usefully move away from formal differences between uses and exchanges to consider ethical ideas attached to social forms of distribution. To this end the discussion now moves away from Marx and the ethics of production towards moral ideas attached to exchange. As any individual or family struggles to produce everything it needs from nature, so it becomes necessary to exchange. But as ancient Greek scholars argued, exchange itself requires the household to surrender autonomy and so involves moral compromise. Accordingly, I now turn to the moral 'problem' of exchange.

PRODUCTION-CONSUMPTION LINKS AND THE SOCIAL DISTRIBUTION OF THINGS

Whereas distinguishing subsistence from exchange implies a radical disjuncture between the household economy producing for use and capitalist exchange, this contradicts ideas that many people themselves adhere to. Householders in El Dos certainly have no moral problem with exchange; they have a long history of producing goods for sale in local markets and exchanging things between households. For them a distinction needs to be made not between use and exchange, but between direct producers who create value from working the earth and can sell or consume the things so produced, and intermediaries who make money from the act of exchange, do not create anything, and yet live off producers and are perceived to maintain a stranglehold on producers' ability to subsist.

In the literature, these moral and political problems can be traced back to ancient Greece (Booth 1993). Although some early Greek thinkers were attracted to the creation of wealth through exchange (*chrematistics*), many, most notably Aristotle, were drawn to the science of household management (Collier 2001:17–18). It is one of the ironies of economic history that the modern term for the science of profit-making, or economics, has its root in the Greek word for household (*oikos*), which conceives it as a self-limiting unit. The Aristotelian tradition insists the purpose of economic activity is to create autarky for the house and leisure for the household head, which should then be used to carry out civic duties and enjoy the good life. The Greek household relied upon and accepted slavery, and feminist perspectives also expose gender hierarchies in the household (Harris 1984; Mackintosh 1984; Moore 1988; Sahlins 1974). Despite this, a scheme based upon the limited end of self-

sufficient reproduction rather than limitless expansion proffers an alternative moral architecture to the liberal fascination with the formal freedom to trade and make profit (Booth 1993).

Aristotle distinguishes between natural and unnatural modes of acquiring goods, and in *The Politics* he proposes a three-part hierarchy placed in descending order of propriety (1962:85–87). Most satisfactory, and deemed as synonymous with natural, is direct acquisition from the environment. Here producers create or gather the things they need for use and then directly consume them or distribute them through the household. This mirrors the kind of economy exemplified by Robinson Crusoe, as well as the satisfaction farmers in El Dos derive from growing food *por el gasto*. Following this, and also classified as natural, is the exchange of goods for goods or money, but only to adjust inequalities and scarcities in nature. The form is equivalent to petty commodity production in which exchange takes place but no profit is sought from the transaction itself. The aim is redistribution in order to meet household needs. Again, this mirrors the ethical scheme of *campesinos* who maintain the right to sell goods they produce from the land to obtain necessary items the household cannot produce. Lastly, and regarded as unnatural and therefore morally iniquitous, there is the practice of trade and the pursuit of monetary gain from exchange. This activity, condemned for seeking profit rather than administering to household reproduction, is the source of the disquiet and criticism commonly levied at intermediaries.

James Carrier's analysis of changes in social relations in the retail trade situates moral ideas about distribution in more recent Western historical tradition. He argues that economic practices and legislation in England prior to the eighteenth century were based largely upon moral precepts and relationships rather than expediency. The model was one of localism and self-sufficiency (see Mintz 1985:75). Most things were produced and consumed by and within households and localities; laws were aimed at preserving local and personal trade relationships within the physical space of the market, and at controlling unscrupulous 'middle-men' (Carrier 1995:63–68). To this end, measures were introduced that favoured local traders. For example, tolls taxed outsiders trying to sell their wares in local markets; these people were in any case regarded as suspect and could be seized as vagrants. Monopolising practices, such as buying up bulk stock before it reached the open marketplace and hoarding it for later sale, were also forbidden. Regulations attempted to ensure that market sales were fair and transparent rather than free; officials controlled weights and measures, quality and the price of goods. At the same time, moral and legislative precedence was given to sellers who had directly laboured upon the goods being traded; practical

constraints limited possibilities for making profits by acting only as an intermediary rather than by producing goods and then selling them. For example, artisanship was encouraged by forbidding iron to be sold without the seller changing its form, and 'honest wares' were those produced by people through the application of their skill and toil directly upon the thing produced (Carrier 1995:69). Rather than exchange through impersonal and impartial relationships, distribution was channelled through personal contacts – friends, neighbours and families. Shopkeepers had regular, known clients and payments were made 'by agreement'. Commercial deals were inured by law against causing hardship; if suffering was the result of an exchange it was legally invalid.

The point is that for a good part of English history the dominant voice insisted that value is created in production and producers were accorded the primary right to sell their goods. As in the recently revitalised farmers' markets, the accent has long been on localism, self-sufficiency and producers selling their own wares to consumers; the preferred form of transactions was 'direct transfers from local producer to local consumer' (Carrier 1995:66). Fair prices could therefore be best achieved when goods went from the farm gate or the artisan's workshop directly to the consumer (1995:64). At the same time exchange was considered 'a social matter involving reciprocity and redistribution: competition, in the sense of one man's gaining at the expense of another, was a violation of this traditional ethic' (Crowley 1974, cited in Carrier 1995:65).

What Carrier describes is a set of social relations established for the distribution of things. In this model, while producers control their labour power and so can be distinguished from slaves, they also own their means of production, which distinguishes them from salaried workers. The importance of ownership of these things lies firstly in the formal freedom it suggests, and secondly in the fact that it allows production, distribution and consumption to take place through personal relationships. For Baudrillard this is the defining characteristic of the artisan class: 'a mode of social relations in which not only is the process of production controlled by the producer but in which the *collective process remains internal to the group*, and in which producers and consumers are the same people, above all defined through the reciprocity of the group' (1975:97, emphasis in original).

The nub of the matter is the opposition in our mind's eye between exchanges that follow from and emerge out of social relations, in which objects are invested with expressive significance, and formal exchanges in which no relationship exists except in the act of exchange, which ends once the transaction is complete and the self-interest of the parties is satisfied. There are a number of potential problems with this latter view, not least the possibility that one or

both parties might never be satisfied, either the producer with the price received, or the consumer who always foregoes other products with different attractions (Sahlins 1974:4). In this view the attempt to realise oneself through consumption choices and personal desires remains a nostalgic but ultimately dissatisfying and doomed project that is dysfunctional not only for the individual but for society as well, (Friedman 1989; Slater 1997:97–98). The more general point for the present argument is that many people in everyday life seem to object to the formal separation of the producer from the consumer and production from consumption. It is precisely this idea that inspires the alternative distribution networks that have come increasingly to the fore in recent years, of which fair trade is but one example.

Encapsulated in the idea of drawing production or producer and consumption or consumer towards one another are a whole range of cultural associations and recurring political and social commitments. In the Christian tradition adhered to in rural Costa Rica, value comes from the earth to sustain humanity; directly consuming nature's product underwrites divine dispensation and reconnects people to God. The more overtly political conviction is that value is embodied in the work of agricultural producers, so they are seen as the sole and rightful owners of the product. By consuming what they create or by selling directly to consumers, producers avoid intermediaries who reap profits but do not create value. Allied to this is the historical memory of self-sufficient, local peasant communities sustaining themselves from nature's abundance and divine grace and distributing goods through known social relationships. Conversely, intermediaries are seen to take value that is not theirs and threaten the livelihood of producers.

David Graeber (2001) has recently argued that alienation and fetishisation are the result of the separation of the two spheres of home and factory, and the two associated forms of human economic activity, production and consumption. If this is the essence of the capitalist transition (Stone et al. 2000:4), it follows that the idea of reconnecting these spheres and activities will proffer the means, at least symbolically, of escaping the whole system of estrangement outlined above. Whereas formal economics locates ethics in a universal rationality and freedom in the inalienable right to promote individual self-interest, an alternative moral voice seeks to draw together that which the market tears apart: the producer to the consumer and the moment of consumption to the act of production.

In the West we have a protracted history of forms of social and economic life in which the producer and the consumer are one and the same person, or where connection is sought and promoted between the activities of production and consumption. The household has appeal not because it is primarily involved in the production and

consumption of use-value, as opposed to the exchange value of commodities, but because it is an arena that combines production and consumption, hence symbolising economic autonomy. When autarky fails and the house cannot produce what it needs other moral options are available; welfare, or, more pertinently here, the distribution of goods directly from producer to consumer. Both these idealised cases, household autonomy and unmediated links between producer and consumer, negate the separation of the two spheres identified by Graeber.

So the first explanation for the attraction of fair trade locates it within a longstanding cultural adherence to an economy based upon direct relationships between people. Images of producers, often labelled family farmers, on packaging and websites evoke a common history and portray a shared present. Many products are marketed in this way, but fair-trade goods play more overtly upon consumers' desire to connect with producers and to ensure them a livelihood. Fair trade thus seeks to counteract the exploitative relations of capitalism and the alienation of people from one another that Marx identified in the market economy. It is no accident that many successful fair-trade goods are associated with small-farmer economies. In their idealised form they escape capitalist production regimes, but struggle with distribution and so are well-suited to imagining and creating alternatives. As we know, a source of a further sense of alienation is the more fundamental separation between people and things; to understand how fair trade implies an escape from this estranged relationship I turn to writings on the gift.

FORGING SOCIAL RELATIONS THROUGH THINGS: THE IDEOLOGY AND POLITICS OF THE GIFT

From the beginnings of their discipline anthropologists have encountered and documented alternative ways of organising the economy. As a result they have often taken issue with the capitalist ethic and used fieldwork data to challenge Western stereotypes. For example, the pioneering ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowski tried to describe Trobriand society from the 'natives' point of view', but he did so using terms of reference from his own society to describe differences and challenge conventional economic wisdoms. In his discussion on kula exchange he attacks the assumption that Trobriand society is constructed around the natural desire to accumulate: '[a]lthough like every human being, the kula native loves to possess and therefore desires to acquire and dreads to lose, the social code of rules with regard to give and take by far overrides his natural acquisitive tendency' (1922:96).

Malinowski is an early exponent of the idea that in other societies the economy operates through the give and take of social relationships and not through impersonal formal exchanges, as is made to appear in capitalist society. Contemporaries of Malinowski with a more radical agenda, notably Marcel Mauss, were not even prepared to accept that natural human acquisitiveness, self-interest and the impartial laws of capitalism had become dominant in the West. Quite the reverse:

Mauss was not trying to describe how the logic of the marketplace, with its strict distinctions between persons and things, interest and altruism, freedom and obligation, had become the common sense of modern societies. Above all he was trying to explain the degree to which it had failed to do so; to explain why so many people – and particularly, so many of the less powerful and privileged members of society – found its logic morally repugnant. Why, for example, institutions that insisted on the strict separability of producers and their products offended against common institutions of justice, the moral ‘bedrock’, as he puts it, of our own – as of any – society (Graeber 2001:162).

Mauss, like Marx, was concerned with alienation, but in the second, legalistic sense identified by Raymond Williams, that is, of the separation of persons from property. This led to his research on *The Gift* (2002 [1925]), since Mauss wanted to understand what it was that led people to believe that a gift should be returned. To this end he explored the different ways people make connections to one another through the medium of things, and analysed exchange in non-Western societies and the history of legal systems and contract law. In his research he thought he had identified a common theme across cultures and through time; objects, he proposed, continue to contain something of the owner, even when they have been passed on. If this were true, things could never be entirely alienated from the person who created them; they would embody the energy and meaning invested in them and producers would feel the impulse to pursue things they produced. What is more, a relationship would be established with the new owner who, having appropriated something from the producer, would feel obliged to make recompense in the shape of a reciprocal gift.

In his reading of *The Gift*, David Graeber (2001, 2004) characterises Mauss’s most famous work as a political tract that seeks ethical spaces in the economy in acts of reciprocity. Mauss’s involvement in socialist politics and the cooperative movement are illustrative of his political commitments (Graeber 2001:156). While gifts seem to offer a potential obverse image to the self-interest of the market, it is always possible to assign selfish motives to ostensibly selfless acts, and the range of actions and motivations opened up by ethnographic data complicates the issue (Davis 1992). Sometimes gift economies

appear almost entirely competitive. Lavish acts of generosity, such as the Roman practice of scattering gold and jewels into a crowd, seem designed to gain status and demean others (Graeber 2001:160). Even achieving 'balance' often involves calculation, as, for example, when we seek an appropriate gift for a wedding or birthday present (Miller 2001). But in many cases of giving there is at least the pretence of an ideal 'total social prestation', in which creating or maintaining a social relationship is represented as an end in itself.

Part of the controversy generated by Mauss's work over the years is no doubt due to apparent contradictions in his observations. One central tenet of Western ideas about exchange is that gifts and the acts of reciprocity they embody cement social relationships. In this respect gifts are personal and ought to be reciprocated in some shape or form. The fact that gifts are understood with respect to the qualities they embody serves to mask any hint of calculation and impersonality, and at the same time means that commensurability is never reached. To donate exactly the same object you receive as a counter-gift would mean equilibrium and the end of the cycle of obligation. But in our imagination gifts should be freely given, absolutely without obligation, and without expectation of receiving anything back. While it must probably be accepted that giving without some return is not possible, this does not detract from an ideology that says that this ought to be so, nor does it deny the possibility of political or social actions that operate on this premise.¹³⁷ Sometimes, for example, gifts are even given to mark the end of a relationship or to try to achieve closure. Because gifts can at the same time be symbolic of interest in social relations and represent absence of self-interest makes them polysemic and hence useful in the play of social life.

Many economic anthropologists now recognise that the value that people attach to things changes as items move through social life (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986). What determines the scale of value? To say that it lies in the object's 'resistance' to our ability to appropriate it, as Appadurai does (1986:1) is to ignore Sahlins's (1976) warning and submit to a purely practical and utilitarian ethic: the false coin of our own dreams (Graeber 2001).¹³⁸ Instead we need to focus upon the range of social, moral and political messages that different things transmit (Stone et al. 2000:4–5). We have two concepts in play. One, alienation, is used to describe a condition under capitalism in which people and things lose their individual qualities and take a generic form, as producers are separated from one another and from the things they make. The implication is that people fail to realise themselves in their social relationships or in their relations with objects. The second, the idea of the gift, can usefully be seen as running in parallel to alienation; gifts are a medium for forging social relations but also of negating personal expediency.

Nevertheless, what does inevitably return is an object with particular, savoured qualities.

The idea of the gift can be used, at a number of levels, to interrogate key aspects of the concept of fair trade as a consumer item. We have already seen that alternative trade deals seek to establish social relations with particular kinds of people, namely peasant producers, and so imply a specific kind of political economy based upon household subsistence and reproduction. The idea of the gift throws further light on the specifically social nature of exchanges, since a gift is precisely a vehicle that cements personal exchanges between people. Gifts can do this because they are attached to an ideology and politics that insists they should be given voluntarily and without hint of self-regard. As such, gifts are clearly distinct from what people raised in the tradition of Western markets are encouraged to imagine as impersonal commodities.

In the anthropological literature two accounts are given for the origin of the ideology of the free gift. The first relies on the distinction between gifts and commodities, the second on that between alienability and inalienability. These terms have been highly problematised, challenged and even reversed in recent years (Appadurai 1986; Bourdieu 1977; Gell 1992; Miller 2001; Weiner 1992), but my concern is not so much with the usefulness of conceptual categories than with the culturally specific ideas attached to classes of things.

The social history of capitalism provides the first location for the idea of the free gift. In this explanation there is a move from an economy embedded in society, in which goods were appropriated through the activation and maintenance of personal and social relationships, to one in which the acquisition of goods became progressively more impersonal. Accompanying this are the changes in production and retail trade outlined above. What is proposed is the historical development of two separate domains; one glossed as 'work', in which interest and impersonal relations prevail, the other called 'home', an autonomous space in which goods are disbursed through reciprocal giving. Gifts in personal life then become the means to create and maintain affective ties to other people (Carrier 1995:152–156). Family ties exemplify personal gift relationships and it is notable that fair-trade literature, publicity and websites often stress producers' families.

Along with the dislocation of home from work, and economy from society, Carrier notes a change in the conceptualisation of the self. Whereas humans were previously regarded as 'situated' beings, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the idea emerged of people as 'autonomous', and morally so. Virtuous acts came to be seen as freely chosen, and from here 'it is only a small step to the argument

that free and unconstrained acts are good' (1995: 162). The highest expression of social, as opposed to economic, relations lies in 'the cultural image of the perfect giving of the perfect present' (1995: 145), one that expresses pure sentiment and love, and transcends monetary value.

Jonathan Parry (1986) provides a parallel explanation for the ideology of the gift by scrutinising it in different cultural settings. Parry is concerned less with the division between gifts and commodities than the extent to which gifts are expressions of interest and are hence inalienable and require reciprocation, or expressions of disinterest, and are therefore alienated from the giver. In developing his argument Parry works with Mauss's concept of the 'spirit of the gift'. Mauss borrowed the Maori idea that objects always contain the spirit of the owner, termed the *hau*, as symptomatic of a more general condition of the inalienable quality of things. The principle, whether metaphysical or moral, behind the inalienable gift is that of reciprocity; goods, or their equivalent, should find their way back to the donor and in this path lies material productiveness and wellbeing (1986:465). Standing in contrast to the inalienable gift is the idea of alienability, the principle that the gift is divorced from the donor in the act of giving and that no connection is established between giver and recipient. Parry associates the idea of alienability with the renunciatory ethic of world religions. The Indian gift of *dana*, for example, embodies the sins of the donor, which are passed on to the recipient, and should under no circumstances return (1986: 459–463). Gifts in this scenario are given in a spirit of expiation, so acts of charity, the disinterested giving of alienable objects, come to have moral weight.

Both explanations for the ideology of the gift locate ideas about giving in social and cultural domains, either through religiously inspired renunciation as a route to accumulate merit, or through adherence to the ideology of the home and reciprocal relations.¹³⁹ The point, and one that can be used to illuminate aspects of fair trade, is that there is a gap between what anthropology tells us about the gift as a vehicle for establishing and maintaining social and power relations, and culturally embedded ideas about what a gift should be. Parry usefully summarises this distinction by pointing to a common misreading of the text: 'while Mauss is generally represented as telling us how *in fact* the gift is *never* free, what I think he is really telling us is how *we* have acquired a *theory* that it should be so' (1986:458 emphasis in original).¹⁴⁰

Now, if the gift in Western thought is credited with two apparently contradictory qualities, the power to establish and sustain social relationships through inalienability on the one hand, wedded to a principle of generous giving on the other, then fair-trade goods add

a further twist. They combine elements of the commodity form, desocialised and 'rational', with the idea of the gift, and so are not dissimilar to other kinds of charitable donations made to NGOs (Stirrat and Henkel 1997). Jars of fair-trade coffee stand alongside other similar commodities on supermarket shelves but remain distinct from them, and this distinction is manifested in the higher price, or premium, paid voluntarily by consumers who could equally well choose a different brand.¹⁴¹ It is clear that this extra payment is couched in terms of the social relationship between producer and consumer, but this relationship is represented as devoid of obligation; the gift is freely given, to be used directly by the recipient, the small farmer, without conditions or 'interest' on the part of the donor. In short, fair trade succeeds, at least in part, by distinguishing itself from other commodities, and it does this by being couched in the idiom of the gift.

At this point the argument can go two ways. The first would recognise that the ideology of the gift, although naturally appealing, is precisely an ideology: a set of socially located ideas that systematically obscure the relationships between parties and power inequalities at work, and make them appear natural:

What starts off as a pure gift, an act of seemingly disinterested giving, morally and ethically divorced from the mundane world, becomes in the end an object or a service intimately entwined in the mundane and interested world. Furthermore, in the course of this journey, the gift creates a series of problematic relations, frequently ambiguous in terms of their meaning and often paradoxical in terms of their implications (Stirrat and Henkel 1997:69).

The suggestion is that the uncomplicated 'public transcript' of fair-trade policy as a specific order obscures a 'hidden transcript' of power relations (Scott 1992). Ethnographic study can play an invaluable role by revealing the way projects and development initiatives do not proceed as policy prescribes, but are understood, transformed and used locally (Lewis and Mosse 2006a). For example, cooperative managers and members engage with fair trade on their own terms, which can exacerbate local tensions and inequalities, or cause friction between partners (Fraser 2003; Lewis 1998; Luetchford 2006; Tallontire 2000). In Chapter 1 I showed how alternative trade in Costa Rica is subsumed under the wider aim of securing the best possible prices for members; at times fair-trade deals can be a bind that requires managers to compromise this goal in the short term. Equally, relationships with other organisations, including NGOs in the North, can become fraught due to differences in perceptions of poverty, for example. Part of the managers' remit is to negotiate and broker tensions between representation and practice, policy and implementation. On the other hand, to demonstrate that fair-trade

initiatives do not work as intended does not mean that they do not work at all, nor does it allow for the good intentions and political motivations of activists and consumers. To deconstruct fair trade leaves little room for an interrogation of the political and cultural ideas and objectives that inspire it, and of the different discursive forms behind the concept (Grillo 1997; Lewis and Mosse 2006b).

One way to approach this is to stay with the notion of the gift. We have seen how Parry and Carrier provide explanations for understanding gift-giving in a market economy as motivated by a spirit of renunciation and selflessness. In both cases, giving generously takes on an air of sacrifice; rather than personal accumulation, the aim is to distribute surplus for moral or social ends. Of course, it is easy to argue that alms-giving and sacrifice, as well as the impulse to buy fair trade, is motivated by self-interest, the accumulation of spiritual merit or personal status by those with sufficient economic security, but this contradicts how people themselves would explain their behaviour, and it ignores cultural ideas that inform actions.

So, instead of mounting a critique of capitalism from the perspective of production and labour, as Marx had done, we can pursue a line developed in French socialist writings from the early twentieth century. A key theme in this work is the destination of economic surplus, which can take the form of ritual destruction, competitive displays or charitable donation.¹⁴² Mauss was fascinated by alms; the political point he wishes to make is that in many religious traditions '[g]enerosity is an obligation, because Nemesis avenges the poor and the gods for the superabundance of happiness and wealth of certain people who should rid themselves of it' (2001 [1925]:23).

I have argued that the concept of fair trade plays upon particular kinds of economic arrangement; namely those encompassing both production and consumption, or those that imply a direct and personal social relationship between the producer and the consumer. In these forms a specific kind of relation is established between people through the medium of objects. We have contractual obligations to give, to receive and to reciprocate which become the basis of social life in many, if not all, societies. The desire for personal aggrandisement can always explain such activities. On the other hand, in Western culture there does seem to be a connection between the ideal of the perfect gift, defined by giving without expectation of receiving anything in return, and the political intention to help others or to forge meaningful social relationships through exchange. In this way we can see that fair trade is entangled in complex Western ideas about selfless giving within and between families and notions of charity and religious duty, combined with the political commitment to sustaining autonomous households that produce in order to consume.

THE POLITICS OF CONSUMPTION

At first sight making a case for an alternative economy based upon notions of giving, religious duty and a cultural commitment to families and households sounds hopelessly idealistic, not least because these are concerns that seem to appeal to middle-class consumers. One of the ironies of fair trade, and other alternative goods that play on anticapitalist sentiments, is that it attracts consumers who gain much from the dominant political-economic order. While working-class shoppers concern themselves with value for money, the better-off consistently buy products with specific qualities attached to them.¹⁴³ Such class-based inflections are often used to express doubts and suggest limits to the transformative potential of distribution networks that appeal to moral ideas.

It is notable that explanations along these lines rely on a particular reading of consumer behaviour. One assumption is that shopping choices are determined by the desire to make class distinctions, which is merely to assume what one might wish to explain; class groups buy certain goods to establish themselves as classes, thereby reducing shopping to an expression of self-interest.¹⁴⁴ While there may be something in this with Porsches and Prada, it does not explain why certain goods are chosen as class-distinctive or, for that matter, why certain kinds of things are marketed as fair trade. A second and related supposition is that shopping is a fetishised activity in which people live out their lives entirely through the objects they consume, without thought or consciousness of the social relations that connect them to the producer. It should be obvious that I do not hold to this position. Certainly, fair-trade goods are sold in ways that directly contradict the idea that consumption practices are independent of moral and political intention, which impels consideration of recent writings on the politics and ethics of shopping.

In a polemical work Daniel Miller (1995b) has argued that we should now regard consumption as the 'vanguard of history'. By this he means that rather than rely on the coming to consciousness of the working class to bring about revolution, we should instead look to acts of consumption as a potential motor for historical change. There are two main justifications for this: the first relates to the power accorded to consumption in economic orthodoxy, the other concerns the nature of the relationships we hold with objects and people by and through our existence as consumers. One of the principal tenets of economic theory, and a key element in the justification of policy, is the promotion of consumer choice. Such is the power of the consumer that Miller, in promoting his polemic, suggests that the consumer who makes daily decisions as to which products to purchase becomes the 'global dictator' of the fortunes of producers

(1995b:8–9). This may be an extreme position, but evidence suggests that activities such as product boycotts, environmental activism and demands for changes in trade policy can influence policy makers, while manufacturers are sensitive to consumer pressure exercised through product choice.

Attached to the power accorded to consumers in the economy is the moral element behind consumption. In the classical economic model, decisions are arrived at on the purely rational grounds of maximisation of self-interest: the desire for the best quality at the cheapest price. The demand for cheap goods then drives the competitive mechanisms of capitalism, which forces down prices. This may or may not be an accurate description of the way the economy works; in any case it is reductive of the desires and interests motivating consumers. While the objects and services we consume may not provide the sole locus of our identity, they do say something about who we are and provide a means to express our relationship to specific people and things (Carrier and Miller 1999:36). This suggests an ethical rather than purely rational aspect to consumption, and provides a counterpoint to notions of impersonal and formal commercial relations.

If we increasingly live out our lives and find meaning in relation to the things that we consume and not through our actions as producers (Miller 1995a:1–2) then the principal arena in which this is carried out is the household. The ethical content of this part of the economy lies in our activities as shoppers. Many people balance hedonistic impulses and desires with the supposed virtue of thrift, and it is this that underpins the ongoing material reproduction and moral economy of the household. The purchases we make for ourselves and for others demonstrate willingness to indulge those closest to us with luxuries and gifts, which in turn establishes a moral relationship with them; at the same time this frippery is justified by the exercise of thrift and the value for money we seek in acquiring the basic necessities required for the household to maintain itself. Consumption hence constitutes a quintessentially ethical moment in our orientation to the world.

It is at this juncture that politics and power enter the argument. As Miller (1995b:9) points out, there is a fundamental contradiction between our actions as consumers, which drive down prices, and our interests as producers. As labour markets shift and firms practise 'flexible accumulation' to produce ever-cheaper goods but sustain profit margins, it is worker remuneration, health and safety and job security that are often the first casualties. Anthropologists come closer than many to seeing and sharing the experiences of workers marginalised by such policies. Harvey argues that it is incumbent upon 'a politically responsible person to know about and respond

politically to all those people who daily put breakfast upon our table, even though market exchange hides from us the conditions of life of the producers' (1993:56).

It is in this political and ethical vein, rather than in an emphasis on class-based, fetishised behaviour, that I think we can better understand fair trade. It provides a more nuanced account of what consumers like to think they are doing when buying fair-trade goods, namely supporting producers struggling to support families in increasingly competitive markets. This is not to deny that there are contradictions. Shoppers certainly look for value for money in supermarkets and so increasingly contribute to pricing regimes that push producers to the limits of profitability. But neither should we ignore the fact that there is a political backlash, albeit from the middle classes, against that process.

COMING TO THE SENSES, OR THE PROBLEM OF LIVING IN A FETISHISED WORLD

Up until now I have examined two facets of the cultural ideology that inspires fair trade: forging social relations with producers, and the role of things as the medium through which this takes place. In this final section I look at consumption and another arena in which Marx identified alienation under capitalism, our relationship to ourselves. Inevitably the problem of fetishisation arises once again, as does the question of the particular kinds of goods that are successfully marketed and marked as fairly traded.

A striking feature of fair trade, apart from its class inflections, is the type of products available. We have already seen that fair trade works particularly with specific production regimes, glossed as small, family farmers. This is usually considered sufficient explanation for the targeting of products such as coffee (Calo and Wise 2005:3). A parallel explanation would focus on the close association between fair trade and luxury, and sensuous and exotic goods, specifically foods.¹⁴⁵ A description of coffee provided by Daviron and Ponte illustrates this perfectly: 'coffee with floral notes and deep, lush fruit; blackberry, strawberry, raspberry, currant, sometimes grapefruit; with a very corporal quality, a muscular quality, with an undeniable sensuality to be found in its musky scent' (2005:130). Fair-trade goods seem to succeed best when they have very specific qualities. They are often what Mintz identifies as 'powerful stimulants' (1996:19). They are full of taste and aroma, which trigger memories and associations (Sperber 1975). If such foods can be said to have a purpose, their aim is to awaken the senses, give pleasure and evoke exoticism. They are products by and through which we realise ourselves as sensual beings in overt and tangible ways, through powerful smells and tastes that

are then incorporated into our very bodies. Of course, one could also argue that such products are ideally suited to connoisseurs and efforts to construct and maintain class distinctions, but their somatic effects indicate that there is probably more to it than this. We have seen that fair trade can be read as an attempt to negate different aspects of alienation under capitalism; we have yet to look at what fair trade tells us about our relationship with ourselves, or what Marx called our 'species-being'.

Marx addresses this issue in the section of the *1844 Manuscripts* on 'Private Property and Communism'. The argument has a number of components, but is grounded in the positive abolition of private property, which he sees as the key to escape all forms of alienation. Under private property, human essence and human life is necessarily distorted and reduced to an unhealthy preoccupation with personal pleasure and the 'sense of having' (2000:100). By contrast, in true teleological fashion, Marx claims 'the whole of history is a preparation for "man" to become the object of sense perception and for needs to be the needs of "man as man"' (2000:102). Beyond the abolition of private property Marx envisions a world in which people develop their true and directly sensuous nature: '[t]he ongoing formation, even cultivation, of the senses was for Marx a recovery of that power of the body lost to the alienating effects of private property' (Stewart 2005:63). The need, then, is for humans to move beyond a relation with objects based upon personal utility and egoistic need towards social utility, human need and enjoyment.

The assertion that the abolition of alienation begins with the senses may help explain why fair-trade goods, which seek to promote human social relations and human needs in the economy, are mainly sensual substances. It can also perhaps clarify why these goods are apparently most attractive to, and associated with, the better-off. These are people less constrained by 'value for money', who might be defined as living in a situation of 'post-scarcity' (Giddens 1996), and who can afford to take into consideration the social nature of objects and be reflexive in their shopping (Macnaghten and Urry 1998:25). It is this that gives credence to the idea that the consumption of fair-trade goods is a form of charitable giving.

Two things remain unanswered. The first is indicated by Baudrillard in a footnote to the discussion on the artisan mode of production, where he focuses upon the way exchange value collapses into use-value in the act of consumption:

In a certain way, the moment of consumption remains of the artisan type even in the system of our political economy. The user who consumes enters into personal relationship with the product and directly recovers its 'use-value', just as the process of artisan labour preserves the use-value of the labour power of the artisan. But this personal exchange in consumption is restricted for us

to the level of the privatised individual. This also remains the only moment that seems to avoid exchange value, hence it is invested today with a very strong psychological and social charge (1975:97, note 2).

Baudrillard seems to suggest that consumption as an activity entails losing sight of exchange relations as we incorporate objects imbued with the energy of peasants and their environment into our bodies and daily lives. Here the attractions of the household and artisan production, in which producers and consumers are drawn closer, reaches its defining moment by way of a specific relationship to the self. Production and the exchange that ensues are obscured, and consumption itself becomes nothing less than the fetishised incorporation of use-value.¹⁴⁶

So the question is the degree to which fair-trade goods, remaining in the world of private property as they do as consumer goods, really allow escape from alienation – or are they merely another form of fetishised object? There is probably no definitive answer to this question. In a recent article David Graeber has argued that all human creative activity involves the fetishisation of objects to some degree:

If fetishism is, at root, our tendency to see our own actions and creations as having power over us, how can we treat it as an intellectual mistake? Our actions and creations do have power over us. This is simply true. Even for a painter, every stroke one makes is a commitment of a sort (2005:431).

So the issue is not whether objects are fetishised to some extent but, as Graeber argues, whether one can occasionally avoid getting lost in the world of objects, stand back, and ‘step into some overarching perspective from which the machinery is visible’ (2005:431). What is this machinery? Graeber appears to mean creative activity as the basis upon which we apportion value to objects and relationships. To escape from what he elsewhere calls ‘partial consciousness’ we would need to understand and remain constantly aware of how our actions recreate the social system in which we live, and how through those actions we reflexively redefine and reshape ourselves as social beings (2001: 64). This is a feat he recognises as extraordinarily difficult to achieve. However, it is within that tradition, which has all sorts of cultural and political precedents, that I locate discourses on fair trade.

CONCLUSIONS

In recent years fair trade has been gathering momentum, and has achieved exceptional growth.¹⁴⁷ One consequence of this is fears of ‘mainstreaming’ and co-option by major retailers, arguments all too familiar to students concerned at the autonomy of new social movements (Hellman 1992). As in the case of organic agriculture,

studied by Guthman (2002, 2004a), fair trade sets itself up as an alternative to mainstream practice which, when it finds success, throws up unresolved contradictions. To interrogate fair trade, to understand its attractions as well as some of the paradoxes it must negotiate, I have concentrated in this chapter upon what makes it possible. By what political and cultural criteria do we adjudicate trade to be fair or unfair, and what moral ideas does it express?

The answer to that question depends upon where one stands. Fair trade works, at least in part, by evoking the closer, shorter circuits of petty commodity production and artisanship. For consumers, this answers a need to activate a more direct and substantive relationship with producers and their products. In this way fair trade provides an idealised solution to a problem some shoppers find in the modern depersonalised economy; it acts as a salve, mollifying the self-interested decisions made in relation to more generic products. The coffee growers and rural people in this study also use productive activity and goods to forge and maintain relationships, but they tend to do so in localised circuits. At the same time they often self-consciously limit engagement with the market, and by practising thrift in the household and producing and adapting the things they need from the world around them, create and recreate a moral, household economy. The evidence is that fair trade, to varying degrees, helps growers and rural coffee economies find stable prices, but its success depends upon the institutional framework within which it operates. There is a clue here to a contradiction; while fair trade gives iconic form to an economy based upon direct relations between producers and consumers, it still operates through intermediaries who appropriate value, even if their work only involves stable employment and a regular salary. For this reason there is some ambivalence among producers about the institutional structure of fair trade.

Despite such differences between the expectations, understandings and experiences of producers, 'middle-men' and consumers in relation to fair trade, there is also common ground. The concept feeds into popular concern about social and moral conduct in exchange, which has long been central to people's lives within Western culture. Admittedly, it has largely been abolished from retail trade, but the success of initiatives to reinject ethics into shopping should not surprise, since the multistranded cultural and political commitments that make it possible are already in place. The theme that brings all the strands together is the negative attitude to capitalist forms of organisation and practices. To order the issues and agendas I have drawn primarily on the writings of Marx and Mauss, and recent reappraisals of their work, particularly by David Graeber. The

advantage of applying this to the case of fair trade is that it gives a context to the discussion that many readers would recognise.

The first theme is the most overtly political and economic, in as much as it focuses upon the way goods are distributed and value appropriated. From one perspective, of concern to producers and supported and reinforced by Christian theology, value comes from nature, from where it is appropriated by human labour. This view gives precedence to creative activity, particularly agricultural work, although it is easily applied to all kinds of manual labour by which raw materials are transformed. When value is understood to be instantiated in objects due to the labour that went into them, intermediaries are left isolated. Rather than creating value, intermediaries are judged to be merely appropriating it by exploiting the distance between producer and consumer. Fair trade does not always escape judgment on this score since it still utilises intermediaries who appropriate value, hence the ambivalence about its institutional workings. There are clear parallels between this stance and Marx's political economy. This analysis provides the frame for the more politicised trade-justice movement, which campaigns to redefine global trade relationships rather than appeal to shoppers' sensibilities through specific products.

The second theme is more cultural. It concerns the way people construe their relationship to each other, to productive activity, to objects and to themselves. The idea that modern life, and particularly capitalist forms of organisation, is an experience of rupture or alienation, sets the conditions for imagining alternatives. Firstly, there is the idea of unalienated social relations. While the economy separates the producer from the consumer, the idea that there should be a connection between them is a strong one. This is core to the fair-trade movement, which plays on the idea of direct connections in brand names such as Cafédirect, in publicity and in campaign work. For example, the manager of Coocafé explicitly states that he wants to reduce the distance between the producer and the consumer. As he says on the Fairtrade Foundation website: 'if we can look one another in the eyes, we can understand each other's needs'.¹⁴⁸ Formal economic relations in which the producer is cut off from the consumer suggest at the same time arenas in which this is not the case. In particular, certain kinds of production-consumption regimes; artisan modes, families, and local face-to-face economies all activate powerful historical and cultural associations.

Many products have long appealed in their packaging and marketing strategies to the desire of consumers to connect with producers. Fair trade takes this trend one step further by promoting a personal social relationship characterised by mutual responsibility; consumers are asked to pay an amount that will constitute a

living wage and producers are expected to provide a certain kind of product in which they have invested specific qualities. So the second concept of alienation focuses attention on objects themselves as a means to establish and maintain relationships. In Western culture, the impersonality of the market is contested, or perhaps mitigated, by the ideology of the gift. In the market, entrepreneurs mediate between producer and consumer, and construe that as providing a service between people who are necessarily disconnected. In contrast to this formal view, there are arenas in which objects are used creatively to forge relationships. Part of this is the idea that giving should be selfless and involve sentiment and sacrifice; this easily elides with notions of charity.

But in a gift relationship, something can always be said to return, even if it is only of a spiritual nature. In the case of fair trade, which combines formal commodity exchange with a personalised relationship, it is fitting that what is exchanged are particular kinds of goods that stimulate the senses. If a shopper gives charity, symbolised by a price premium, they gain in return a moment of stimulation from the other side of the globe. As part of this reciprocal process producers sometimes reflect on the final destination of the beans they grow and pick, and they like to imagine that consumers care about their lives and conditions. For consumers, too, coffee reeks of exoticism and evokes connections with far-off lands. It is good to think, imagine and dream over a cup of coffee, and part of that experience is an identification with producers and their lives. This is a third avenue that allows us to hold up our guard against alienation as we realise ourselves as sentient beings. What better reminder that exchanges cannot be reduced to depersonalised 'value for money' than the exotic pleasures of coffee, tea and chocolate?

There are, then, two aspects to the broad appeal of fair trade. The first is the political reaction to capitalism as an exploitative and impersonal system, combined with a more cultural preoccupation with alienation and generic, fetishised commodities. The second is the perceived antidote to the first, expressed through the idea of drawing producers and consumers, production and consumption, closer to one another in order to realise the quality of objects and the value of labour embedded in goods, as imparted by growers in specific places. The power of such formulations lies in their capacity to resonate with radical ideas about the creation of value and exploitation, but combine them with more conservative agendas around tradition, community and the family. These common convictions, albeit expressed and pursued for different reasons and in different ways, by producers, cooperatives, alternative trade organisations and consumers, suggest fair trade will remain a broad and enduring feature of modern life.