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Trajectories of Global Solidarity. Fair Trade Activism Since the 1960s: Introduction

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Abstract

Activists throughout Western Europe joined Southern actors in demanding a reform of global trade during the 1960s. This forum focuses on the subsequent trajectories of fair trade activism: the initiatives which aimed to achieve equitable economic relations between the South and the North. The evolution of this movement is situated within larger debates about social movements since the 1960s. The forum demonstrates the importance of a transnational perspective, particularly the impact of the global South and European integration. It highlights fair trade's broad constituency and the contested development of its goals and repertoire. The movement's trajectories challenge us to reassess how activists attempted to shape a post-colonial world in which consumption had become a predominant fact of life. Regarding this strand of activism as part of crucial post-war developments provides a fresh perspective on the history of transnational civic activism.

You say you want a revolution, well, you know, we all want to change the world...
You say you got a real solution, well, you know, we'd all love to see the plan...
You tell me it's the institution, well, you know, you better free your mind instead.¹

For a moment, it seemed as though the whole world could suddenly be transformed. In 1968 people across the globe did not just share a vague notion of being part of a common movement for change. Some of them in fact addressed their initiatives explicitly at global politics and economies. Such attempts were shouldered by a range of participants well beyond the radical left-wing students who have so far dominated the image of activism in the 1960s. Focusing on the history of fair trade in Western Europe, this forum examines one of the most prominent examples of such transnational activism, which has also been particularly diverse and long-lived. We define fair trade activism broadly to include all civic initiatives which aimed to achieve more equitable economic relations between the South and the North. The forum highlights the rise of this strand of activism during the second half of the 1960s and the demise of its hopes for radically transforming the global marketplace in the short run. Despite the suggestion by John Lennon and Paul McCartney, however, these activists did not turn away from politics. Rather, this forum shows how they developed alternative visions of a fair global marketplace and new methods to promote them. It thus addresses pertinent questions about the constituency, objectives, repertoires and transnational scope of social movements which emerged during the 1960s.

Activists throughout Western Europe joined Southern actors in demanding a reform of global trade between the late 1960s and the middle of the 1970s. Challenging the meaning of 'fair trade' as used within the framework of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) since 1947, they

¹ John Lennon and Paul McCartney, 'Revolution', *The White Album*, 1968.

dragged the issue out of the realms of international organisations and universities into meeting halls, churches, schools and streets. Especially around the much-regarded second United Nations Conference on Trade and Development in 1968, these activists felt that global change was necessary and possible.² These promoters of reforming global trade found like-minded individuals among those championing development, peace and solidarity. Thus, a heterogeneous social movement comprised of church groups, peace activists, youth organisations, students and political parties evolved in Western Europe.

Focusing on this patchwork social movement, this forum contributes to a reorientation in the historiography on movements which came to the fore during the 1960s. Several publications which appeared around the fiftieth anniversary of '68' have stressed the broad support for change and its impact beyond institutional politics in favour of foregrounding radical groups such as the student movement.³ Since its inception in the 1960s, fair trade has evolved into a highly visible and widely supported phenomenon in contemporary society. The history of fair trade activism is therefore uniquely suited to expand the perspective on the 1960s and their legacy. It combines the recent historiographical reorientation towards a broader social spectrum with a transnational perspective. The contributions to this forum probe the impact of the global South, the European and global perspectives and transnational networks of the emerging social movements. They demonstrate how the legacy of this era relates to the search for a new position in a post-colonial world, the ambivalent attitudes towards consumer society and the diverse trajectories of global solidarity since the 1960s.

This forum thus contributes to three strands of historiography: the emergent literature on the fair trade movement, the transnational history of the 1960s and debates about the subsequent trajectories of social movements aimed at global solidarity. Although the fair trade movement has been one of the most long-lived and impactful social movements to come out of the 1960s, until recently it garnered remarkably little attention from historians. Social scientists, on the other hand, have primarily debated its economic impact on producers and current practices of fair trade certification.⁴ Over the last years, several studies on the history of the fair trade movement in individual countries have been published.⁵ They have decidedly broadened the scope by highlighting how fair trade certification was only part of a more diverse set of initiatives to promote economic justice between South and North.

The following articles transcend the predominantly national focus of the existing scholarly literature on fair trade. They acknowledge that this strand of activism was notable for adapting the repertoire of consumer activism. At the same time, it becomes clear that fair trade entailed more than selling 'fair' products. Products which were sold were usually chosen to address political issues. Other activities – ranging from traditional protest rallies to arson – were also employed. Likewise, the fair trade movement did not just address citizens as consumers, but also targeted local, national

² Sönke Kunkel, 'Contesting Globalization: The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and the Transnationalization of Sovereignty', in Marc Frey, Sönke Kunkel, and Corinna R. Unger, eds., *International Organizations and Development, 1945–1990*, (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 240–58; Sönke Kunkel, 'Zwischen Globalisierung, internationalen Organisationen und "global governance": Eine kurze Geschichte des Nord-Süd-Konflikts in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 60, 4 (2012), 555–77.

³ Christina von Hodenberg, *Das andere Achtundsechzig: Gesellschaftsgeschichte einer Revolte* (München: Beck, 2018); Detlef Siegfried, *1968: Protest, Revolte, Gegenkultur* (Ditzingen: Reclam, 2018); Vgl. Geert Buelens, *De jaren zestig: een cultuurgeschiedenis* (Amsterdam: Ambo, 2018).

⁴ Peter van Dam, 'The Limits of a Success Story: Fair Trade and the History of Postcolonial Globalization', *Comparativ*, 25, 1 (2015), 62–77.

⁵ Konrad Kuhn, *Fairer Handel und Kalter Krieg: Selbstwahrnehmung und Positionierung der Fair-Trade-Bewegung in der Schweiz 1973–1990* (Bern: Ed. Soziothek, 2005); Ruben Quaa, *Fair Trade: Eine global-lokale Geschichte am Beispiel des Kaffees* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2015); Matthew Anderson, *A History of Fair Trade in Contemporary Britain: From Civil Society Campaigns to Corporate Compliance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Peter van Dam, *Wereldverbeters: een geschiedenis van fair trade* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018); Jan van de Poel, '35 jaar Oxfam-Wereldwinkels: over groei en organisatorische vernieuwing', *Brood & Rozen*, 11, 4 (2006), 7–25; Matthieu Gateau, 'Quelle(s) stratégie(s) de distribution pour les produits équitables? Le cas Français ou la difficile alliance entre logique militante et logique commerciale', *Économie et Solidarités*, 37, 2 (2008), 109–22.

and transnational governmental institutions and companies. The historical perspective this forum offers also foregrounds ideas and activities which were later disbanded. For instance, activists initially attempted to address international institutions such as the United Nations Conference for Trade and Development directly. Similarly, many alternative trading organisations set out to foster independent and exclusive channels of production, distribution and retail. The following articles thus contribute to a better understanding of the evolution of the movement and help to appreciate the background against which better known initiatives were conceived and became successful.

This forum likewise provides an opportunity to elaborate on the transnational dimension of the history of the 1960s. Contemporaries and scholars have attempted to explain the events of the late 1960s by referring to a conflict between generations, the (mal)functioning of political systems, a shift in mentalities and the incendiary role of media spreading hopes and fears. Beyond these factors, contemporaries around 1968 frequently remarked on the links between protest movements and social transformations in different parts of the world. This aspect has come to the fore in historical research in tandem with the transnational turn in historiography.⁶ The contributions to this forum show how existing networks, ideas and practices reassembled in reaction to decolonisation. They present transnational networks and frames of reference as distinct factors in explaining '1968' and its aftermath. Demands for change were formulated with an eye to global relations, expectations fed by the opportunities global politics seemed to offer and spurred by events across the globe. The history of fair trade reinforces the recent trend to neglect comparing national trajectories in favour of analysing perspectives shared across borders as well as transnational relations which influenced local developments. Two hitherto neglected aspects stand out in particular: the importance of direct and indirect relations between the global South and North, and the relevance of a European framework next to a global perspective.

The contributions to this forum underline the importance of taking the global South into account in the history of civic activism. In this respect, they connect to current scholarship on the way in which actors from the global South indirectly and directly inspired activists to reconsider their local situation and inspired new activities.⁷ The 'Third World' was not (just) an idealised projection in the minds of radical students. Actors from the global South impacted specific initiatives for fair trade and moulded the ways in which their supporters in Western Europe regarded them. In fact, one could argue that the history of fair trade has its origins outside of Europe. As Matthew Anderson and Peter van Dam demonstrate in their contributions, Latin American liberation theology and Latin American economists in particular challenged the prevailing global order.⁸ Fair trade activists played a crucial role in the translation of their ideas. Throughout fair trade history, both direct relations with actors in the global South and the images with which they were connected in the North were immensely influential. This forum

⁶ Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey, *Die 68er Bewegung: Deutschland – Westeuropa – USA* (München: Beck, 2001); Mark Kurlansky, *1968: The Year That Rocked the World* (New York: Ballantine, 2004). More recently, this aspect has been further explored by Timothy Scott Brown, *West Germany and the Global Sixties: The Antiauthoritarian Revolt, 1962–1978* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Robert Gildea, James Mark and Annette Warring, eds., *Europe's 1968: Voices of Revolt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956–1976* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of Vatican II: Western European Progressive Catholicism in the Long Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁷ Samantha Christiansen and Zachary A. Scarlett, eds., *The Third World in the Global 1960s* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013); Kim Christiaens, 'States Going Transnational. Transnational State Civilian Networks and Socialist Cuba and Sandinista Nicaragua Solidarity Movements in Belgium (1960s–1980s)', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis/Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 89, 3–4 (2011), 1277–306; Andreas Eckert, "'Was geht mich denn Vietnam an?'" Internationale Solidarität und "Dritte Welt" in der Bundesrepublik', in Axel Schildt, ed., *Von draußen: ausländische intellektuelle Einflüsse in der Bundesrepublik bis 1990* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2016), 191–210; Christoph Kalter, *Die Entdeckung der Dritten Welt: Dekolonisierung und neue radikale Linke in Frankreich* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2011); Quinn Slobodian, *Foreign Front: Third World Politics in Sixties Germany* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

⁸ John Toye and Richard Toye, 'The Origins and Interpretation of the Prebisch-Singer Thesis', *History of Political Economy*, 35, 3 (2003), 437–67; Horn, *The Spirit of Vatican II*.

suggests that in order to grasp the nature of global solidarity movements, we need to take into account the cross-currents of direct relations between Southern and Northern actors on the one, and their projections of global relations on the other hand.

Whereas the global dimension of the 1960s has frequently been invoked, the relevance of the European framework to the ways in which contemporaries thought and acted has gone largely unnoticed. Surprisingly, the European Economic Community (EEC) proves a prominent target in the campaigns of the early fair trade movement. Recent historiography has stressed how decolonisation drove European integration as cooperation promised compensation for the loss of colonies.⁹ The history of fair trade activism demonstrates how decolonisation and European integration were not just related by political elites, but also by citizens across Europe.¹⁰ What is more, it was not limited to abstract discussions about international politics, but had a manifest material presence.¹¹ This materiality is apparent in the contributions by Benjamin Möckel and Peter van Dam, which show how fair trade activists sought out products such as (soluble) coffee, aluminium and cane sugar, which embodied unfair conditions of global trade. Their availability and pricing was affected by international trade regulations, in which European economic policy was a crucial factor. The European dimension in some cases even drove the way in which campaigns were designed, as Peter van Dam points out. The process leading up to the enlargement of the Common Market in 1973 provided an important impulse for transnational cooperation, but at the same time drove activists with different national perspectives apart.

The history of fair trade does not only insert the European dimension into the history of the global 1960s. It also takes up the line of scholarship which has expanded the view of the Cold War to include connections between the South and North as an important factor.¹² The following contributions show how activism could at times transcend the East–West divide by focusing on the position of the global South. The challenge fair trade activists formulated to the global order did not neatly fit the opposition between East and West. It was usually not a crude demand of replacing the free market with socialism. Instead, the North–South-axis which was the point of departure for fair trade activism perforated the familiar Cold War oppositions of East and West, left and right, capitalism and socialism.

Fair trade activism therefore eludes attempts at classification in the traditional categories of social movements. All four contributions stress that it was not limited to the radical ‘new left’ but was instead carried out by a coalition which spanned from church groups to radical student groups, from traditional political parties to circles preoccupied by international development. David Kuchenbuch has pointed out how the notion of ‘one world’ has become prevalent since the middle of the 1960s.¹³ Kuchenbuch retraces the origins of this notion to both leftist attempts to define a ‘third way’ and Christian movements. In a similar vein, Matthew Anderson demonstrates the crucial position of Christian groups and ideas within the fair trade movement. Their radical interpretations of Christian traditions and attempts to cooperate with secular activists make clear that ‘Christian’ should not be equated with ‘moderate’ or ‘conservative’. Katharina Karcher points out the entanglement of violent and non-violent strategies among different constituencies of the Anti-Apartheid movement

⁹ Giuliano Garavini, *After Empires: European Integration, Decolonization, and the Challenge from the Global South, 1957–1985* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson, *Eurafrica: The Untold Story of European Integration and Colonialism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); T.

¹⁰ See Richard Ivan Jobs, *Backpack Ambassadors: How Youth Travel Integrated Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

¹¹ See Benjamin Möckel, ‘The Material Culture of Human Rights: Consumer Products, Boycotts and the Transformation of Human Rights Activism in the 1970s and 1980s’, *International Journal of History, Culture and Modernity*, 6, 1 (2018), 76–104.

¹² Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Kim Christiaens, ‘From the East to the South, and Back? International Solidarity Movements in Belgium and New Histories of the Cold War, 1950s–1970s’, *Dutch Crossing: Journal of Low Countries Studies*, 39, 3 (2015), 187–203.

¹³ David Kuchenbuch, ‘“Eine Welt”. Globales Interdependenzbewusstsein und die Moralisierung des Alltags in den 1970er und 1980er Jahren’, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 38, 1 (2012), 165–66.

in West Germany since the 1960s. These findings imply that the divides between old and new movements, secular and religious actors, established experts and youthful activists and violent and non-violent tactics are less pertinent than assumed in many histories of the 1960s. An emphasis on the innovative aspects of ‘1968’ – often assumed in the analysis ‘new’ social movements – risks misunderstanding the evolution of activism and social transformation. Although recent struggles over the post-colonial global economy decisively shaped fair trade activism, the social bandwidth of its supporters and the roots of its ideas and repertoire are crucial to understanding its history.

These insights have to be taken into account in discussing the trajectories of global solidarity since the 1960s. The fact that these activists were building on ideas which had emerged during the 1950s and drew support from traditional religious and political groups reinforces the call to regard the events of the late 1960s as part of long-term development.¹⁴ Much of the debate about the impact of this era has focused on the effects on national politics and Western European societies. However, the development of transnational networks and evolution of visions of Europe, the global South and a global perspective were also affected. The networks between like-minded activists and between South and North which developed during the 1960s would continue to function and generated new initiatives during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Their perspective on Europe and the world, however, shifted notably. Hopes of quick and wide-ranging changes in the structure of global trade dissipated among fair trade activists during the first half of the 1970s. Attempts to target global and European governance directly through European institutions and venues such as the United Nations Conferences on Trade and Development had little effect.

Well before attempts at establishing a New International Economic Order were abandoned in international politics, activists in Western Europe perceived a closing off of global political opportunities. Nonetheless, this disillusion with international politics did not produce a shift towards local and apolitical activism. Fair trade activism was redirected at specific issues and incremental change. As a result, activists prioritised pragmatic initiatives which addressed global issues, such as selling products to support specific states and producer groups, boycotting individual companies and countries and promoting gender equality and environmental awareness in daily life. Because of this more pragmatic outlook, the diversity of views and approaches became more pronounced.

Initiatives from the 1960s provided fair trade activism with networks, repertoires and a general theme. These evolved through subsequent years, as debates over the goals, repertoire and viable coalitions among activists produced different trajectories. Some activists gave up altogether – a category about whom we know far too little. Others maintained a transformative vision and developed new approaches to match it. Matthew Anderson analyses how some Christian organisations developed an inclusive message, which merged Christian and secular ethics in order to address a wider audience. Benjamin Möckel notes how a more professional approach to selling products was adopted by alternative trading organisations. Katharina Karcher points out how activists turned to targeting specific multinational companies. She draws attention to the fact that fair trade activists would sometimes adopt violent tactics as a way of publicising their demands more effectively. The fact that the markedly non-violent fair trade movement would employ violent tactics complicates our understanding of the legacy of the 1960s. Many Northern solidarity movements had accepted violence as a means of resistance in the global South during the 1960s.¹⁵ The purported transition from joyful and peaceful protest to grim and violent action around 1968 appears just as ill-fitting as the notion of an inherently violent mindset. Rather, we should explore under which circumstances those involved rejected restricting violent tactics to the global South.

The trajectories of fair trade activism remind us that consumption was an essential part of the repertoire of social movements operating within post-war ‘consumer societies’ in Western Europe. Benjamin Möckel highlights how consumption was essential on different levels. It provided a

¹⁴ Siegfried, 1968; Philipp Gassert, *Bewegte Gesellschaft: Deutsche Protestgeschichte seit 1945* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2018).

¹⁵ See Alexander Sedlmaier, *Consumption and Violence: Radical Protest in Cold War West Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

means to connect people from the North and the South through specific products. Consumption also allowed activists themselves to mark their identities as ‘alternative consumers’ and demonstrate their solidarity with people from the global South by buying particular products. Fair trade products were thus a means to publicise and mobilise global solidarity movements but could be part of a specific consumer lifestyle too. As Katharina Karcher shows in her contribution, not buying or even destroying a product was also a way of linking activism to a society in which consumption had become a central issue.

Assessments of the impact of social movements which came to the fore during the 1960s have generally been markedly ambivalent. A more liberal attitude in private and public life has been lauded and denounced, the integration of consumption into the repertoire of social movements celebrated and criticised, activists applauded as forerunners of emancipation and exposed as old-fashioned regarding their views of gender roles.¹⁶ This forum includes transnational relations in this debate. The aim of achieving large-scale change in favour of the global South and the tactics of consumer activism remained staples of fair trade activism. In taking up the cause of the South, activists risked reducing it to the issue of smallholder farmers producing tropical commodities or take a patronising stance towards the very people they wanted to support.¹⁷ As they urged people in the North and the South to come to terms with decolonisation and create a more equitable post-colonial world, their movement appealed to citizens to act out their role as consumers on behalf of producers in the South. All contributions stress the importance of specific products as tangible means to convey their message and offer a ‘fair’ alternative to consumers. This approach, however, prioritised the market as primary field of activism and suggested that there was a ‘right’ kind of consumerism available.¹⁸ Highlighting the ambivalence of attempts to come to terms with a post-colonial world and consumer society, fair trade history challenges us to critically assess the legacy of the diverse strains of activism which took centre stage during the late 1960s. Regarding them not as outliers, but as part of crucial post-war developments provides a rich and fresh perspective on the history of social movements.

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¹⁶ Werner Bühner, ‘Alte und neue Deutungskämpfe um “1968”’, *Neue Politische Literatur*, 64, 1 (2019), 3–25.

¹⁷ Tehila Sasson, ‘Milking the Third World? Humanitarianism, Capitalism, and the Moral Economy of the Nestlé Boycott’, *The American Historical Review*, 121, 4 (2016), 1196–224.

¹⁸ See Gavin Fridell, *Fair Trade Coffee: The Prospects and Pitfalls of Market-Driven Social Justice* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

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