A stroke of luck? Securing a place for the history of fair trade

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On the Waterfront

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Lecture and interview: World shops in the Netherlands
academics to radical activists, from longstanding organizations to very new ones, from museums to trade unions. In keeping with the tradition in Taiwan of extending a warm welcome to visitors from abroad, I was inundated with materials. I was pleased that pictures I took almost fifteen years ago on my first visit could be shared with organizations that still existed.

One unexpected surprise was the unscheduled meeting with a number of relatively new trade unions who shared an office and were run mostly by young people (EVA Airways Union, Railway Workers Union, Taiyuan Flight Attendants Union). The Taiyuan Flight Attendants Union (an external trade union under the Taoyuan Confederation of Trade Unions (TYCTU)) was holding a plebiscite on whether or not to call a strike (concerning EVA Air cabin staff), with the result expected the very evening of our visit. On strike they went, and the strike lasted for seventeen days (until July 6), as the longest strike in Taiwanese history. Again, they were very eager to share materials, and we received a union vest from every union.

In addition to these acquisitions, we purchased books from local bookshops, book fairs and the like. (Eef Vermeij)

Lecture and interview
27 June 2019

Lecture by Peter van Dam, University of Amsterdam

A stroke of luck?
Securing a place for the history of fair trade

Not every day do I feel moved by a neat stack of boxes. As I stood in front of the shelves containing the archive of the Landelijke Vereniging van Wereldwinkels [National Federation of World Shops, lvww] this spring, I felt both relieved and elated. I had discovered this essential material on the history of the fair trade movement in storage six years earlier. After it had nearly been thrown out last year, I was pleased to find it here, safe and accessible for future research at the International Institute of Social History.

The movement promoting fair trade emerged in the 1960s. Politicians and intellectuals from the Global South challenged the prevailing economic disadvantages for countries producing raw materials, of which market prices were declining in relation to finished products manufactured in industrialized countries in the North. The resulting economic inequality was ethically unacceptable, they argued, not just because trade regulations favouring wealthy nations perpetuated it, but also because economic dependency on raw materials in the Global South was the result of past colonial relations. Decolonization made this situation untenable and provided critics with a concrete argument to advocate change, because the newly independent nations could muster a majority in the United Nations General Assembly. This majority was leveraged to convene the first United Nations Conference of Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in 1964. This widely publicized conference in Geneva, however, produced very little change. Despite thorough preparations and high expectations, the second conference in 1968 yielded a similarly disappointing outcome.

At both occasions, representatives of Northern nations willingly discussed technicalities but declined to commit to structural reforms.

Faced with the unwillingness of their own governments to help bring about more equitable conditions for global trade, some citizens of nations in the North looked into new ways to raise interest in this issue. They concluded that for change to become possible, their own governments would need to be pressured into a more cooperative stance. Informing and mobilizing the public in the North could instigate such change in disposition. In 1968 a group of Dutch activists launched a campaign depicting cane sugar as a tangible example of the prevailing global inequality. Even though cane sugar – produced in the Global South – cost nominally less than the beet sugar from Western Europe on the world market, beet sugar was in fact cheaper in Dutch grocery stores. This was caused on the one hand by the import tariffs levied on cane sugar by the European Economic Community and on the other hand by European subsidies for beet sugar. Cane sugar was thus uniquely suitable for illustrating the inequity: people in the South were not lazy or poor by chance but faced poverty perpetuated by policies designed to benefit wealthy nations. Moreover, the cost of this inequity was passed on to Dutch consumers: in addition to missing out on the benefit of the low prices of cane sugar, beet sugar was being subsidized from the taxes they paid.

Local cane sugar campaign groups formed throughout the Netherlands. They sold cane sugar door to door, organized lectures and ral-
shops, many groups in the 1970s focused on campaigning and hosting meetings and often regarded selling products as a means to raise awareness about the issues they addressed. Many world shops did not have a store at their disposal and sold their products at market stalls or temporary stands in churches instead.

The model was quickly adopted across the Netherlands, and an official national umbrella organization was established in 1970. It was facilitated by the ecumenical activist group Sjaloom, which had also been a vocal presence in the cane sugar campaign and in many other campaigns concerning global politics in the late 1960s. Initially operating as a foundation, it was transformed into a more democratic federation in 1972. The resulting LVVW by then comprised 120 member groups. The model became so popular that the main product supplier, the Stichting sos (now known as Fair Trade Original), could not keep up with demand. The model was also presented to activists in other countries at meetings that followed up on the cane sugar campaign initiative. Soon, the world shop was a European phenomenon.

Serving as local hubs for activism, world shops were pivotal in many notable campaigns in the 1970s. For example, their members were active picketing during the successful boycott of coffee from Angola, which was eventually removed from the shelves of all Dutch supermarkets. Gradually, the focus shifted from campaigning and publicizing the issue of global inequality to selling products to make an immediate difference. Since the
1980s, professionalization figured prominently on the agendas of international meetings of world shops. Early hopes of achieving structural reforms quickly faded, as new rounds of international negotiations did not bring about significant results. Moreover, producers increasingly appealed to their counterparts in the North to take their products seriously. They pointed out that their livelihood depended on the sales, which became all the more pressing when Latin America was hit by a debt crisis in the early 1980s. As a result, world shop activists felt they needed to operate more professionally, addressing issues such as shop decoration, promotion, and sales techniques.

The same circumstances gave rise to new initiatives to promote fair trade. A new strand of activism emerged around the issue of clothing, leading the Clean Clothes Campaign to be launched. This effort made use of new global communications to establish a worldwide network addressing the injustices in the garment industry. At the same time, the campaigning organization Solidaridad introduced fair trade certification as a new means to promote the issue. Adopting a model applied in the ecological movement, Solidaridad defined a set of criteria for products to meet to be certified as fair trade products. The introduction of Max Havelaar certified coffee enabled such products to be sold outside traditional channels, as supermarkets could stock fair trade-certified coffee from any company that opted to apply for certification. Fair trade certification greatly enhanced the reach and visibility of fair trade, although it preserved the balance between activism and sales by offering fair trade products outside of the activist context of specific shops and stalls.

When Max Havelaar coffee was introduced in 1988, world shops reacted with mixed feelings. Some objected to working with the very supermarkets they had often targeted for unfair trading practices. After heated debates at the national assembly of the LVVW, a sizeable minority prevented their association from joining the board but nonetheless delegated an observer. Others regarded the introduction of fair trade products in regular stores as a milestone for the movement that had promoted these products for two decades. Members of the world shop in the town of Borne commented to a local paper that they welcomed this development, which would allow them to focus on what they regarded as their main task: educating the local public about global trade.

The world shops did not seem impacted by the introduction of certified coffee in the years that followed. Their number in the Netherlands soared to around 400 increasingly professional shops. Gradually, however, they declined and reached a state of crisis in the last ten years for several reasons. Like other local retailers, business became increasingly difficult for these shops. At the same time, world shops relied more on selling products from national and local institutions were discontinued during the 1980s and 90s. While their most popular products, such as coffee and chocolate, were also available in supermarkets, the crafts they had traditionally sold as well went out of fashion. Finally, the continued emphasis on selling products did not appeal to the younger generation of activists, who instead connected to initiatives such as the Clean Clothes Campaign. The volunteers at the base of the movement had aged and were struggling to keep shops running. As a result, the number of shops in the Netherlands reached a state of crisis in the last ten years. Members of the world shop in the town of Borne commented to a local paper that they welcomed this development, which would allow them to focus on what they regarded as their main task: educating the local public about global trade.

World shops have been pivotal in the history of the fair trade movement, anchoring the issue locally and connecting diverse groups of local activists by offering joint spaces and activities. The shops were a model for similar initiatives across the world and have figured in transnational exchanges throughout their existence. However, an archive is of little interest to many activist groups and civil society organizations beyond their responsibility to account for subsidized projects. When I called on the LVVW in 2013, my expectations were modest, even as I was invited to have a look at the material in their storage room. Finding an archive documenting the fair trade movement to its earliest activities felt like an incredible stroke of luck. Thanks to the
Interview of Huub Jansen by Peter van Dam

The initiative to transfer the archives of the lvvw [National Federation of World Shops] to the iish was decisively supported by Huub Jansen (1950), who was director of this federation from 1990 until 2015. Following the lecture on the history of the world shops, Peter van Dam interviewed him about his personal involvement.

You came to the world shops as an outsider. When and why did you start working for the lvvw?
I applied to work for the lvvw in 1990. They were looking for someone from outside the movement, someone who had business acumen and understood social activism. I fit the bill, thanks to my experience with social work and my consultancy firm for education and social work.

The course of the movement was hotly debated at the end of the 1980s. What was on the agenda when you became the director?
The lvvw had just lost its funding for youth work, because committed adults were the main drivers at that point. As a result, some of the original employees had to leave. Those remain-
cially oriented. Twenty years after they opened, world shops were recognized as the best chain of gift shops in the Netherlands. The focus on sales shifted attention away from education within the shops. Many world shops remained involved in educational programs at schools and associations, although support for political action declined among world shop volunteers. During the 2000s, however, world shops responded to their changing role by becoming the chief initiators of the Fairtrade Towns Campaign in the Netherlands. In many current world shops, the Fairtrade Towns Campaign has promoted awareness of and campaigning for fair trade.

World shops have been very popular since the 1970s. In the 1990s, there were 400 world shops in the Netherlands. Does the rapid decline in number since 2010 surprise you? Although the decline does not surprise me, its speed does. Retail in the Netherlands has developed remarkably recently. The density of shops has been too high, and the 2008 crisis caused a sharp decline, whilst the internet was taking over a lot of customers. In many villages and cities, retail spaces were vacated. World shops have been affected by this development.

In addition, the world shops split up into two separate associations. The previous government discontinued subsidies for education about development cooperation. As a result, the LVVW had to abandon its projects aimed at educating young people. Without mutual relations among world shops and specialized support, the continuity of small organizations such as world shops becomes tenuous.

Over the years, world shops have been remarkably active reinventing themselves. What future do you envision for them? The social activism of the world shops and the environmental movement have in my opinion raised interest in corporate social responsibility. Fairtrade products are increasingly available in supermarkets and gift shops. A meaningful world shop can remain operational only if sales income covers basic expenses for rent, light, transport and the like. Selling a combination of fair-trade products with other socially responsible goods might work, as the so-called waar stores have done successfully. To get sustainability and global justice on the agenda, world shops will need to team up with like-minded organizations.

Fabricating Modern Societies: Education, Bodies, and Minds in the Age of Steel

Edited by Karin Priem, University of Luxembourg, and Frederik Herman, University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland (PH FHNW)

Fabricating Modern Societies: Education, Bodies, and Minds in the Age of Steel, edited by Karin Priem and Frederik Herman, offers new interdisciplinary and transnational perspectives on the history of industrialization and societal transformation in early twentieth-century Luxembourg. The individual chapters focus on how industrialists addressed a large array of challenges related to industrialization, borrowing and mixing ideas originating in domains such as corporate identity formation, mediatization, scientification, technological innovation, mechanization, capitalism, mass production, medicalization, educationalization, artistic production, and social utopia, while competing with other interest groups who pursued their own goals. The book looks at different focus areas of modernity, and analyzes how humans created, mediated, and interacted with the technospheres of modern societies.

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