Introduction: The Rise of the Fair-Trade Citizen-Consumer

The idea that shopping is the new politics is certainly seductive. Never mind the ballot box: vote with your supermarket trolley instead. Elections occur relatively rarely, but you probably go shopping several times a month, providing yourself with lots of opportunities to express your opinions. If you are worried about the environment, you might buy organic food; if you want to help poor farmers, you can do your bit by buying Fairtrade products; or you can express a dislike of evil multinational companies and rampant globalisation by buying only local produce. And the best bit is that shopping, unlike voting, is fun; so you can do good and enjoy yourself at the same time.

*The Economist* (2006)

Calls for consumers to use their shopping choices to make a difference to social and environmental causes have become increasingly prevalent in contemporary society. We are faced with a diverse array of ethical labels when we enter the supermarket, each one offering us the opportunity to use our status as consumers to enact our citizenly duties. Consumers are regularly told that they are co-responsible for global poverty, environmental degradation and public health (to name but a few), and that by making the right choice, they can alleviate the suffering of hard-working producers, save a rainforest or reduce the burden on public spending. Consumers are constructed as powerful actors in the global market society whose individual choices have the capacity to shape social, political and economic systems. This book challenges this account of the consumer as an autonomous and individualist chooser
and instead argues that consumption is a collective and complex process that is embedded within routine and normative practices. Consumption is performed in the course of pursuing daily practices and is thus subject to situational and institutional forms of collective constraint. Rather than the consumer operating in a vacuum, his/her behaviour is shaped and coordinated by infrastructures of provision and social conventions. To explore these ideas, this volume offers a detailed case study of fair-trade consumption and support and reveals how the fair-trade citizen-consumer has been called to action and publicly represented as an individual, at the same time as market interventions are editing the choices available to consumers and collective cultures of fair-trade support are flourishing. This book offers an international perspective on the growth of the fair-trade movement in the UK, Sweden and the USA, with a close focus on fair-trade consumers living within a Fairtrade Town in the UK.

Fair-trade is the most well-known ethical consumer label across the globe, with roughly six in ten consumers recognising this label in a survey of 24 countries (FTF, 2011a). The fair-trade model presents itself as a simple solution to the problems of poverty created by unfair trading relations. Fair-trade provides market access to marginalised producers through the development of long-term trading partnerships that enable producers to support their families and livelihoods. Producers receive a minimum price for their crop or product, which is intended to cover the cost of sustainable production, and an additional social premium for investment in social, environmental or economic development projects. The use of this premium must be democratically decided upon by producers within the farmers’ cooperative or between workers on a plantation. By choosing a fair-trade coffee or chocolate, which may or may not be more expensive than their regular brand, consumers are told they can help to make a difference to the lives of families in the developing world who will now receive a ‘fair’ price for their produce. The global chain between the producer and the consumer is shortened as the active choice of a consumer in one corner of the world is connected to the improved livelihood of a producer in the other corner.

There has been a striking increase in the consumption of fair-trade goods across the world, with global sales quadrupling in value between 2005 and 2010 (FLO, 2011a). Existing accounts of the ‘fair-trade consumer’ by the fair-trade movement, policy makers and academics tend to assume that the decision to purchase a fair-trade product is the conscious choice of a ‘citizen-consumer’ who wants to register their support for producers in the developing world or, more politically, to ‘vote’ for fairer trade through their consumption (Bennett, 2004; Carter, 2001;