Conclusion: The Ideology of the Citizen-Consumer

At the fifth Fairtrade Towns conference in Malmö, the founder of the first Fairtrade Town, Bruce Crowther, read an emotive extract from Harriet Lamb’s *Fighting the Banana Wars and Other Fairtrade Battles* (2008), which told of how a woman named Maria from Costa Rica had lost her baby because he was born with deformities, owing to the widespread use of pesticides on banana plantations in the 1980s (see Lamb, 2008: 6–7). After finishing this extract, Crowther turned to the audience and asked, after hearing this, ‘how can one possibly go out and buy a banana that isn’t fair-trade?’

It is often assumed that as soon as consumers are given the information that their consumption is environmentally or socially damaging, they will be motivated to act. However, this book has demonstrated that the situation is not quite as simple as this. Consumption is a complex process, which is collectively constituted and embedded within routine and normative practices. As we have seen, the fair-trade movement is quite aware of this, despite its persistent representation of the fair-trade consumer as a citizen-consumer acting voluntarily in the marketplace. The citizen-consumer is a powerful symbol, which is used to publicly represent and motivate support for fair-trade because it serves a number of important functions for different individuals and institutions. However, by representing fair-trade consumption in this way, this book has revealed that a moral hierarchy of value is created in which the fair-trade choice is defended as the only course of action that a concerned and ethical consumer ought to make (as exemplified by Crowther’s question). It could be argued that such an approach ignores the ‘lay normativities’ of those whose consumption is motivated through alternative logics and moralities. This book has listened to the normative and practical challenges of the ‘ordinary’ consumer and has questioned
whether individual consumption should be made to bear the level of responsibility that is often placed upon it. This concluding chapter will summarise the key debates presented throughout this volume, as well as draw the reader’s attention to their wider relevance for policy makers keen to promote sustainable consumption behaviour and future academic debates on (ethical) consumption practices.

The complexity of consumption

In this book, I have challenged the dominant image of the fair-trade citizen-consumer who uses his/her individual shopping choices to ‘vote’ for a better world. Fair-trade consumption is embedded within a wider socio-political context, which shapes and coordinates this behaviour. Rather than the consumer operating as an individual actor, this figure is constrained or enabled through various collective structures, such as infrastructures of provision, social norms and institutional frameworks. We have seen how the fair-trade movement creates opportunities for consumers within their social networks and how collective cultures of fair-trade support can create dispositions towards fair-trade consumer goods, as well as deeper engagement in the fight for global justice. We have also seen how interventions within the market and fair-trade ‘choice-editing’ have been made possible because of a complex set of interactions between various actors from the state, market and civil society, at the same time creating a growing number of ‘accidental’ fair-trade consumption acts. Not all those who buy fair-trade do so because they want to ‘vote’ for a better world, and not all those who fail to buy fair-trade do so because they do not care about global poverty. This book has demonstrated that consumption is a complex process that is neither fully reflexive nor constrained, and therefore the attribution of sovereign power to individual consumer choice ought to be re-evaluated.

This book has argued that a practice-theoretical approach can be usefully employed to account for the differentiation of consumption practices. In such an approach the focus shifts away from the individual to explore the capacities of social networks, social norms surrounding appropriate behaviour, infrastructures of provision, and institutional configurations of responsibility. In so doing, it becomes apparent that the fair-trade consumer does not exist as an abstract or generalised figure across all contexts but rather is constituted through complex and contingent interactions between each of these elements at different times and places. By focusing on the development of the fair-trade consumer movement across three countries, the reader has learnt how