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Churchgoers and the Fair Trade Town: an analysis in terms of social and spiritual capital.

Key Words

Fair Trade Town, social capital, spiritual capital, church social action, faith and action, praxis

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Abstract

In this article I analyse the Fair Trade Town project in terms of both social and spiritual capital. In bringing together diverse sections of communities, the work that churchgoers carry out in promotion of Fair Trade can serve as an example of the generation of social capital. However, the concept of social capital fails to capture the role of core Christian concepts, such as justice and the love of neighbour, in the practice of Fair Trade. Spiritual capital, the motivation for churchgoers to carry out the work that they do for Fair Trade and other action for social justice, has an important role to play. Spiritual capital can serve as a source of bringing communities together, but also as a form of division, as economic paradigms are challenged. I identify a key role for the spiritual capital that fuels Christian action for the Fair Trade Town and other work for social justice: it has the potential to contribute to addressing the degraded nature of contemporary public debate.

The Fair Trade Town

Fair Trade is an ethical consumption project which demonstrates that a guiding principle of fairness and justice is possible in international trade. From the outset of the Fair Trade project, churches have been involved in its

promotion. Anderson indicates the significant role which churchgoers play in Fair Trade support¹ and argues that the social movement which has sprung up to promote the concept, has been the key driver towards its success.² Much of the activity of this social movement in the UK takes place under the umbrella of the Fair Trade Towns scheme.³ In addition to assisting the producer communities which benefit from Fair Trade, Fair Trade Town initiatives serve to strengthen the communities in which they are established, by bringing together diverse sections of a population to promote a joint project. The strengthening of bonds between diverse groups of people is inherent within the Fair Trade Towns scheme. The awarding of the status of a Fair Trade town is dependent on the fulfilment of a set of criteria.⁴ These criteria demand engagement between a Fair Trade Steering Group and diverse local audiences including: small businesses, local branches of large business corporations, local government and the media. The research of Malpass et al. investigates activist support for Fair Trade in the UK city of Bristol.⁵ They indicate the positive impact of the Fair Trade City campaign on community identity and also point out the significant contribution made by churchgoers. Peattie and Samuel underline the synergy between churchgoers' activism and Fair Trade Towns, stating that 'the involvement of churches [in Fair Trade Towns] is natural given their instrumental role in Fair Trade's origins.'⁶

The Fair Trade Town and Social Capital

In order to describe and understand the role of churches in Fair Trade Town initiatives, the concept of social capital is clearly pertinent. For Putnam, the emphasis of social capital is on the building up of strong communities by bringing together groups and individuals.⁷ Putnam identifies religious organisations, places of worship and religious citizens as significant repositories of social capital.⁸ They have the potential to reverse the trend towards atomisation and create a stronger, closer, more sociable, society. With their predominantly voluntary and distinctly social forms of action in promotion of Fair Trade, the churches fulfil the description of 'doing with' that Putnam argues is the very substance of social capital.⁹ More specifically, church action for Fair Trade can serve as an example of bridging social capital that Putnam describes, strengthening ties but in an outward-looking and inclusive manner.¹⁰ Church social networks are at the heart of many Fair Trade Towns, effectively disseminating the message of fairness in trading and the promotion of Fair Trade Produce.¹¹ Church-based activists draw on the contacts their churches have with a range of community bodies including: schools, youth groups,

branches of local government, businesses and the media.¹² This social capital not only works to the benefit of Fair Trade. Following the logic of Putnam's understanding of social capital, the churchgoers, in bringing together diverse partners in inclusive collaboration, are serving to strengthen the community itself.

The local networks which the churchgoers are willing to access are connected with much wider networks that transcend national boundaries and the divide between the global north and global south. Fair Trade Towns are characterised by 'interconnecting activism' with activists belonging to multiple organisations and campaign groups, synergising their support for Fair Trade with wider issues of development and sustainability.¹³ The Fair Trade activists are involved with Christian non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as Christian Aid, Cafod and Traidcraft, which in turn utilise wider church networks to support their social justice aims. The Fair Trade movement is itself a network of diverse partners transcending borders. In the UK the Fair Trade Town scheme is linked to the work of the Fairtrade Foundation and this in turn is connected with Fairtrade International, the international Fair Trade labelling organisation.¹⁴ From a flourishing start in the UK, the concept of the Fair Trade Town has spread across the globe and, as of 2021, there are over 2000 Fair Trade Towns. As well as in many European countries, there are Fairtrade Towns in North America, Australasia, the Far East, and they can now be found in some parts of the global south, including: Ghana, Brazil and Ecuador.¹⁵ Fair Trade activism provides a way in for local churches to examine issues of the global economy. Through the stall selling Fair Trade goods, or a Fair Trade church service or coffee morning, global concerns can be made present in the most familiar of local settings. Nicholls and Opal observe that the discourse around social capital tends to operate on either a community or a national level; however, they argue that the social capital generated by the Fair Trade movement can be understood as operating on a global basis.¹⁶ Place-based activism in Fair Trade Towns serves to generate social capital, not only in their own locality, but also in producer communities on the other side of the globe. The ambition of Fair Trade to promote worker empowerment and cooperative decision making in producer groups contributes to the building of stronger communities, representing a strengthening of social capital. Hence Nicholls and Opal describe locally based Fair Trade activism as 'Putnam's "bridging" social capital writ large.'¹⁷

The work of Fair Trade Towns can form a fit not only with the concept of bridging social capital but also with linking capital, which acknowledges the existence of uneven power relations.¹⁸ The focus of linking capital is on the

ability of individuals and groups to network with organisations which have decision-making powers. By networking with a range of organisations which have national and transnational reach, local Fair Trade activists can play their role in attempting to influence the global trade system and its inequalities.¹⁹ However, in introducing the issue of power imbalances, tension arises for the concept of social capital. Linking capital can be viewed as a means by which to divert resources to assist communities, but, more controversially, Billings refers to linking capital as a contribution to building capacity to ‘challenge or confront.’²⁰ The recognition of power imbalances inherent within the concept of linking capital, and the need to challenge those imbalances, will not only involve the strengthening of some ties but also the loosening of others. The work of Fair Trade activists operates in the context of the global trade system in which local communities, in both the global north and global south, perceive themselves to be relatively powerless in the face of the seemingly immutable forces which dominate the system. Attempts to challenge the trade system will bind together in solidarity those who are doing the challenging, but will result in division when confronting vested interests within the system. Moreover, the concept of social capital fails to capture the central role that justice plays in the Fair Trade movement. The movement was established to achieve justice, in drawing attention to the plight of those producers disadvantaged within, or bypassed by, the global trade system. A sample of churchgoing activists showed that their involvement in the Fair Trade Town project is motivated by the desire to see religiously inspired concepts, such as justice and love of neighbour, made real in the life of society and the economy.²¹ Cloke et al. point out that Fair Trade provides an opportunity for Christians to ‘enact aspects of their faith’ viewing this enactment as a form of ‘faith-virtue ethics.’²² Hence it is important that the practice of Fair Trade is characterised by just action in order for it to serve as an enactment of faith. Bringing different sections of society together to work on the Fair Trade project is a happy outcome of the Fair Trade Town but, for churchgoing activists, the main aim is to seek justice.

The Fair Trade Town and Spiritual Capital

The inability of the concept of social capital to capture the centrality of justice in Fair Trade can be seen as part of a wider argument regarding the limitations of social capital. Social capital, as it is described by Putnam, is based on understandings of what a social good is within the prevailing social and economic system. Some theologians have argued that this focus precludes a questioning of the social or economic order and does not place sufficient

emphasis on confronting injustice. For example, Bretherton critiques the concept of social capital because its framing in terms of ‘capital’ is closely associated with the discipline of economics.²³ To some extent economics is looked upon as a master way of thought, its assumptions unchallenged. Whilst agreeing with Putnam that churchgoers do contribute significantly to enhancing social capital, Gill critiques Putnam’s analysis for its failure to take into account the role played by theology in shaping churchgoers’ volunteering and social action.²⁴ Conscious of the limitations of social capital in capturing what is taking place at the intersection between faith communities and public life, the public theologian Christopher Baker has advanced the concept of spiritual capital. Spiritual capital refers to the value system which motivates people of faith to public action.²⁵ As Baker and Graham describe: ‘it is the “why” that drives the “what.”’²⁶ Values which are embedded in the texts and practices of faith communities can both motivate and shape the action that is carried out.

The relationship between social and spiritual capital is not necessarily straightforward. Baker discusses the contribution of religious groups to strengthening social capital through secular policy initiatives, but points out a tension in the propensity of spiritual capital to ‘critique accepted norms, values and methodologies if these go against the fundamental value of human dignity and worth made in the image of God.’²⁷ There is dissonance here: the very spiritual capital which serves as motivation for the generation of social capital, can also serve as denunciation of the structures of the society to which the social capital is contributing. Enacting a trade system based on principles, such as justice and love of neighbour, may at first sight appear uncontroversial. However, in thinking through how principles of justice should be applied to the global economy, a gulf emerges between spiritual capital and the prevailing paradigm. Faith-based activism on projects such as Fair Trade Towns, or other work for social justice, is often carried out alongside social movements which offer critique and challenge to the prevailing economic order.²⁸ It appears that spiritual capital, which nurtures social capital, can lead the believer into a questioning of the status quo. This may result in challenge to views prevalent in society, engendering division as much as a coming together around shared values. Baker and Graham refer to spiritual capital in the context of spaces of secular-religious rapprochement, stating that they are ‘spaces and places where people are prepared to invest their spiritual capital for the sake of creating an excess of meaning, value and problem-solving power.’²⁹ There is a coming together, a standing in solidarity, but there is also challenge, as spiritual capital is mobilised to solve or ameliorate societal problems.

Spiritual Capital and Public Debate

Despite the potential for conflict, I argue that the articulation of spiritual capital has an important role to play in contemporary public debate, particularly given recent shifts in the nature of public discourse. Explanations as to why churchgoers are involved in social projects such as: the Fair Trade Town, the City of Sanctuary, homelessness centres, addiction services, and many other acts of Christian praxis, can provide a much-needed contribution to public debate. The political philosopher Michael Sandel is concerned about the degraded nature of public debate in the populist era. He is critical of the technocratic attitude to the economy and society, blaming this for the public anger from those left behind by the neo-liberal economic project.³⁰ However, he is equally critical of the shallow nature of a ‘rude and shrill’ public discourse which seeks to assert its criticisms without listening in reply. He states that both fail to engage with ‘the moral conditions that animate democratic citizens; neither cultivates the habit of reasoning together about competing conceptions of justice and the common good.’³¹ I will conclude this article by briefly discussing these developments and indicating why the public articulation of spiritual capital fulfils a need in this time of degraded public discussion.

As part of his critique of a technocratic outlook on the organisation of society, Sandel attacks what he terms the ‘primacy of facts.’³² He points out that people make sense of ‘the facts’ based on their opinions. Pre-existing beliefs and worldviews shape how ‘the facts’ are understood, rather than debate proceeding from an agreed understanding of data. Hence, data alone will not persuade. There is resonance here with the thinking of Evans who identifies the problem in terms of a ‘myth gap’, this being an absence of narrative with which to engage the emotions in support of social justice.³³ He calls for groups advocating for social change to challenge the narratives of the populist era, the ‘anti-myths’ which have proved to be so enchanting, most notably fear and mistrust of ‘the other’. The anti-myths need to be combatted not with policy papers and data but with compelling myths that ‘can animate real-world social and political movements to incubate new values and push policymakers to make a radical shift towards justice and sustainability.’³⁴ The articulation of spiritual capital, the values, narratives and visions that motivate Christians to action, can challenge the anti-myths. Religious narratives serve as an alternative vision, holding together an appeal to emotion whilst retaining rational meaning. The spiritual capital which motivates churchgoers to support Fair Trade, a call for justice and fairness informed by biblical narratives, has the ability to engage the emotions to combat the emotional charge of the anti-myths of our depleted public debate. Northcott’s reflection on the Christian understanding of love

which informs the work of the Fair Trade organisation, Traidcraft, is a pertinent example of an articulation of spiritual capital with the potential to engage the emotions as well as the intellect to support efforts for social justice.³⁵ The anti-myths based on fear can be challenged by social projects described as a work of love.

Sandel's concern regarding the absence of public reasoning on moral issues, including discussion of competing understandings of justice and the common good, is linked with his observation of an increasingly polarised society, lacking the ability to debate together. He argues that 'public spaces that gather people together across class, race, ethnicity, and faith are few and far between.'³⁶ Here there is a link with Putnam and the concept of social capital. Bridging capital, as evidenced in the Fair Trade Town can serve to bring diverse people together. However, for Sandel, the coming together is for reasoning about 'competing conceptions of justice.'³⁷ This captures something of the essence of spiritual capital. The content of spiritual capital is rooted in values and deeply held belief, challenging both a technocratic outlook and the 'rude and shrill' nature of public communication. Rather than serving to unproblematically bring everyone together, spiritual capital can offer challenge to prevailing paradigms which may result in division. The Fair Trade Town is contributing to a more vibrant public space, which does serve as bridging capital, but which also, by means of its spiritual capital, contributes to building genuine, forthright public debate about the values that inform our economy and society.

Conclusion

Which analysis better fits the Fair Trade Town? Is it a repository of social capital, capable of invigorating receptive communities or is it a counter-cultural movement, a fight for social justice in a fractious society? Fair Trade activism represents a holding in tension of the elements of bridging, a bringing together as described in the concept of social capital, and of challenging, a fight for social justice in a divided public space. The message of Fair Trade affirms a coming together of people, transcending societal, economic and geographical boundaries. Yet it also serves to draw attention to division, between the just and the unjust and the difference in experience between rich and poor. As a group which constitutes the majority of the activist body for Fair Trade in the UK, churchgoers hold on to both of these vital aspects: bringing together diverse sections of society and confronting social injustice. In a time of weakened public debate, articulation of the spiritual capital which fuels churchgoers' work

for Fair Trade and other forms of Christian praxis, serves to embolden public discussion. This does not represent an unproblematic coming together, rather it opens space for a genuine discourse about competing notions of justice and the common good.

Notes

¹ Anderson M (2015) *A History of Fair Trade in Contemporary Britain: From Civil Society Campaigns to Corporate Compliance*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.44-66.

² Anderson, *A History of Fair Trade*, pp.1-4.

³ Nicholls A and Opal C (2005) *Fair Trade: Market-driven Ethical Consumption*. London: Sage Publications, pp.172-177.

⁴ Nicholls and Opal, *Fair Trade*, p.173.

⁵ Malpass A, Cloke P, Barnett C and Clarke N (2007) Fairtrade Urbanism? The Politics of Place Beyond Place in the Bristol Fairtrade City Campaign. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 31(3): 633-645.

⁶ Peattie K and Samuel A (2018) Fair Trade Towns as Unconventional Networks of Ethical Activism. *Journal of Business Ethics* 153(1) 265-282 on 274.

⁷ Putnam R (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

⁸ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, pp.65-79.

⁹ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, pp.116-117.

¹⁰ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, pp.22-24.

¹¹ Cloke P, Barnett C, Clarke N and Malpass A (2011) Faith in Ethical Consumption in Thomas L (ed) *Religion, Consumerism and Sustainability: Paradise Lost*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.93-114 on 103-105.

¹² Dawson, M (2017) *Fair Trade and the Kingdom of God: Examining Fair Trade Action by Churches as a form of Public Theology*. PhD Thesis, University of Leeds, UK, pp.87-90.

¹³ Peattie and Samuel, *Fair Trade Towns*, p.275

¹⁴ Nicholls and Opal, *Fair Trade*, pp.127-140.

¹⁵ Fair Trade Towns (2021) Number of Fair Trade Towns for Today. Available at: www.fairtradetowns.org (accessed 30 August 2021).

¹⁶ Nicholls and Opal, *Fair Trade*, p.174.

¹⁷ Nicholls and Opal, *Fair Trade*, p.174.

¹⁸ Baker C (2009) *The Hybrid Church in the City: Third Space Thinking*. London: SCM, p.49.

¹⁹ Peattie and Samuel, *Fair Trade Towns*, p.275.

²⁰ Billings A (2009) *God and Community Cohesion: Help or Hindrance?* London: SPCK, p.29.

²¹ Dawson M (2020) Justice and Demonstration of Christian Principles: Why Churchgoers Support Fair Trade. *The Expository Times* 131(8) 348-357.

²² Cloke et al., *Faith in Ethical Consumption*, p.100.

²³ Bretherton L (2010) *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, pp.39-40.

²⁴ Gill R (2013) *Society Shaped by Theology: Sociological Theology Volume 3*. Farnham: Ashgate, pp.125-173.

²⁵ Baker C (2009) Blurred Encounters? Religious Literacy, Spiritual Capital and Language in Dinham A, Furbey R and Lowndes V (eds) *Faith in the Public Realm: Controversies, Policies and Practices*. Bristol: The Policy Press, pp.105-122 on 111-112.

²⁶ Baker C and Graham E (2018) Afterword: Genealogy and Generativity in Baker C and Graham E (eds) *Theology for Changing Times: John Atherton and the Future of Public Theology*, pp.175-186 on 179.

²⁷ Baker C (2007) Entry to Enterprise: Constructing Local Political Economies in Manchester in Atherton J and Skinner H (eds) *Through the Eye of a Needle: Theological Conversations Over Political Economy*. Werrington: Epworth, pp.191-206 on 200.

²⁸ Peattie and Samuel, *Fair Trade Towns*, p.274.

²⁹ Baker C and Graham E, Afterword, p.179.

³⁰ Sandel M (2020) *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* London: Allen Lane, pp.104-108.

³¹ Sandel M, *The Tyranny of Merit*, p.108

³² Sandel M, *The Tyranny of Merit*, p.108-110.

³³ Evans A (2017) *The Myth Gap: What Happens When Evidence and Arguments Aren't Enough?* London: Transworld, P.104.

³⁴ Evans A, *The Myth Gap*, p.104.

³⁵ Northcott M (2007) The World Trade Organisation, Fair Trade and the Body Politics of St Paul in Atherton J and Skinner H (eds) *Through the Eye of a Needle: Theological Conversations Over Political Economy*. Werrington: Epworth, pp.169-188 on 183-4.

³⁶ Sandel M, *The Tyranny of Merit*, p.226.

³⁷ Sandel M, *The Tyranny of Merit*, p.108.

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