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## The ethical complex of corporate food power

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**Abstract.** In this paper I explore how nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the popular media in Britain have been able to pressure Britain's top supermarkets to undertake 'ethical' reforms of their global supply chains. I argue that, although the 'ethical complex' of British supermarkets is the product of unique historical and geographic circumstances, it also testifies to the capacity of agro-food activists to amplify their influence through the popular media. More broadly, it complicates assumptions about the demise of the Habermasian 'public sphere' at a time when massive corporations control both the media and the food supply. Three case studies of NGO campaigns illustrate this point. At the same time, however, they point to tensions between the international scope of certain NGO campaigns for supermarket 'ethical reform' and the more localized concerns of their constituencies.

### Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, commodity-chain exposés have become standard fare in popular media portrayals of globalization. Whether produced by muckraking journalists, advocacy groups, or some combination of the two, these stories of sweatshops, plantation slavery, and blood diamonds depict, graphically if formulaically, the abuses suffered by workers and nature on one end, the excesses of luxury and choice afforded to affluent consumers on the other end, and the immense profits accumulated en route.<sup>(1)</sup> The formula has proven remarkably effective in driving one consumer-goods industry after another—either in response to an exposé, or in order to preempt one—to pledge 'responsibility' for the conditions under which their goods are produced. As a result, farms and factories in the remotest, cheapest-labor reaches of transnational supply chains find themselves subject to stringent codes of 'ethical' conduct and 'best practice', to serial audits and surprise inspections.

All this media and corporate attention to long-observed labor processes raises, in turn, at least two challenges for the scholarly analysis of geographies of work. First, it suggests we need to give more serious consideration to popular media portrayals of work in the globalized economy. We need to consider how these stories are produced, and by whom, and how they are implicated for better or worse in new forms of transnational commodity-chain governance. Second, we need to examine what alternative geographies of work these stories advocate, whether explicitly or implicitly.

Here I take up these challenges by examining how, in Britain, the popular media and certain nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have come to participate in the governance of work in the fresh-produce supply chains of supermarkets, especially those in Africa. These actors have helped create what I call here the 'ethical complex' of British corporate food retailing: that is, a condition compelling supermarkets to respond, in various ways, to NGO demands for ethical sourcing—a term which itself has taken on multiple meanings. This condition reflects, in part, broader trends in corporate management practices; in part, Britain's recent history of food scares and

<sup>(1)</sup> For example, the Pulitzer-Prize-winning Knight Ridder series by Conner and Atkinson (1996), Global Witness (1998), Raghavan and Chatterjee (2001).

rural trauma; in part, a longer history of British supermarkets' preoccupation with image; in part, a still longer history, dating back to the antislavery movement, of charity activism. But the ethical complex also reflects the efforts of Britain's contemporary agro-food movement—whose members do not simply depend on but indeed include elements of Britain's print and broadcast media—to expose, reform, and in some cases reconfigure transnational geographies of work in food.

This paper has three parts. The first provides background to the development of the ethical complex as well as to my current inquiry. Second, I build a case for a critical reappraisal of the relationships between corporate food retailers, NGOs, and the popular media, drawing on recent scholarship on agro-food change and agro-food advocacy networks. More specifically, I argue that these relationships complicate certain long-held assumptions about the demise of the 'public sphere', as Habermas understood it, in an age of massive corporate power (Habermas, 1989).

In the last section, based on qualitative research conducted in 2000–02, I focus on three NGOs' campaigns for ethical food supply chains.<sup>(2)</sup> I examine the role of 'media work' in their overall strategies for gaining voice, legitimacy, and influence, and consider how these strategies have been affected by the recent history of food scares and controversies. Two points emerge from this analysis, each of which speaks to broader fields of inquiry.

First, intense market pressures and the mutual need for a good 'brand profile' have, somewhat paradoxically, helped certain nonprofit advocacy groups acquire a measure of power vis-à-vis Britain's top food retailers. In other words, the mad-cow (BSE) crisis and other food scares forced retailers to overhaul the 'practice of public relations' in ways that no longer preclude but indeed depend on critical public debate. Certain NGOs, as informed and highly visible participants in this debate, have been able to push the supermarkets to respond to their own concerns about the ethics of food production. The case studies show that the ethical complex of British supermarkets has emerged out of specific historical conditions and situated relationships, and is in this sense unique. But they also offer insights into the potential (as well as the potential limitations) of civil-society movements that demand accountability from all kinds of globalized brand-name capital. Most broadly, then, the analysis contributes to the growing body of work on 'counter-hegemonic globalization' (Evans, 2000; Keck and Sikkink, 1998). I should note that this paper stems from a rather separate project, and seeks more to provoke further inquiry than to present conclusive findings. It also draws methodological guidance from the literature on agro-food networks and transnational advocacy networks, though for reasons of space and familiarity does not discuss them in any detail (Busch and Juska, 1997; Fitzsimmons and Goodman, 1998; Stone, 2002; Whatmore and Thorne, 1997).

The second point relates more directly to the theme of this special issue. As diverse NGOs have stepped up their efforts for supermarket reform, it has become clear that understandings of ethical food sourcing are far from settled. Initially the term was associated with specific NGO campaigns for better working conditions in global-South supply regions. But years of food scares and domestic rural economic crisis have brought greater media attention to the plight of British farmers, and have energized other NGOs' campaigns to renationalize and relocalize the country's food supply. By examining the objectives and internal politics of the movement to define, market (or 'brand') ethical food, I aim to show how different NGOs' campaigns are informed

<sup>(2)</sup> This research involved interviews with NGO staff, journalists and independent food writers, supermarket 'social responsibility' and public-relations managers, and representatives of the two import firms that sell nearly all of Zambia's fresh produce in the United Kingdom. The paper also draws on a selective reading of UK press coverage on the featured NGOs between 1996 and 2002.

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by different *normative* geographies of work: in other words, ideas about where a nation's food supply should be produced—which are also, of course, ideas about who should take part in producing it.

### **Globalization stories**

The first impetus for investigating the ethical trade practices of the supermarkets came from my own research into the high-value fresh-vegetable trade linking Zambia and the United Kingdom (Freidberg, 2003; 2004). Supplying the major high-street supermarket chains with prepacked mangetout peas, French beans, and a variety of 'baby veg', this commodity chain epitomizes the 'nontraditional' trajectories of the 'globalized' agro-food system (Little and Dolan, 2000). It developed in response to national and international neoliberal economic reforms; it has benefited from improvements in transportation, communication, and packaging technologies; and, as in other 'buyer-driven' commodity chains, its participants must respond quickly to shifts in consumer and retailer demand (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, 1994). Although Zambia began exporting significant volumes of fresh produce only in the mid-1990s, its two major horticultural firms quickly developed an image of corporate social responsibility, both by complying with international codes of agricultural best practice and by drawing up their own national code. These codes, as I will discuss again later, require significant investments in on-farm hygiene and environmental management, as well as 'worker-welfare' facilities such as crèches, schools, and on-farm clinics (Du Toit, 2001). The firms' expatriate managers claimed that they had to comply with the ostensibly 'universal' environmental and social-welfare standards of these codes in order to do business with the British supermarkets, which were the only European food retailers that bought packaged, semi-processed fresh vegetables in quantities large enough and constant enough to justify the Zambian firms' investments in this kind of value-added production.

For their part, Britain's fresh-produce importers and supermarket managers believed that it had become increasingly important to demonstrate concern for workers in their overseas supply chains, given the famously competitive and demanding conditions of the UK food-retail market. Yet, the supposed source of demand, the consumer, figured only peripherally in their explanations for this trend. Indeed, these individuals more often claimed that consumers, as shoppers, showed no sign of caring where or how their mangetout peas were produced, as long as they were clean, pretty, and, above all, available in a convenient package at the store nearest them. Both quantitative and qualitative research provides support for this view. Market surveys indicate that the percentage of consumers who express concern about ethical sourcing has risen in recent years, but only about 2% of consumers would go out of their way or pay extra for 'cause-related products' (Mintel, 1999). Similarly, in Miller's ethnography of shopping in north London he found that even consumers who discussed their environmental and social concerns while pushing their trolleys through the aisles rarely bought 'ethically marked' products (Miller, 2001).

Demand for ethical trade, therefore, came not from consumers per se but rather from a handful of charities who had become, according to one supermarket public-relations director, too 'shrill' to ignore. That is, they had used the media to amplify both their criticisms and their demands of the supermarkets, and most of the top chains had felt compelled to respond, in ways I will discuss later in the paper.

More generally, actors who worked in the fresh-produce export, import, and retail sectors clearly dreaded any form of bad media coverage, whether as a result of a charity's 'name and shame' campaign, a food scare, or simply an influential journalist's muckraking. As they saw it, such coverage could shape consumers' day-to-day shopping habits. Although a story about child labor on an African fruit farm was unlikely to have

the ‘stampede’ effect of a food scare, it could potentially ‘tarnish’ a retailer’s overall brand, as one supermarket manager put it, and cause consumers to ‘migrate’ to a competitor’s stores.

One veteran produce importer claimed that the newspapers were ‘the driving force’ behind the adoption of ethical trade standards by supermarkets in the 1990s. Yet certain televised reports also shook the industry. Several actors in both Zambia and the United Kingdom, for example, said they could not afford another *Mangetout*, a documentary screened on public television in 1997. *Mangetout* contrasted the harsh surveillance and precarious livelihoods of workers on a Zimbabwean horticultural export farm with the affluence and complacency of the British consumers who bought Zimbabwean mangetout at Tesco, the largest supermarket chain in the United Kingdom. Although the narrative did not explicitly criticize, the military music soundtrack that played during a Tesco representative’s visit to the farm made a less-than-subtle comment on the retailer’s neocolonial control over its supplier.

Exporters’, importers’, and retailers’ preoccupation with the media pervaded not only their descriptive accounts but also, in some cases, their interactions with me. In Zambia, for example, I was aggressively interrogated by company personnel intent on determining (I later found out) whether I was an undercover ‘BBC agent’. Such attitudes were especially striking compared with the relative nonchalance I had encountered during earlier research on the fresh-vegetable trade between Francophone West Africa and France. Participants in this latter trade took care not to reveal information they did not want to fall into the hands of suppliers, buyers, or competitors, but they rarely mentioned or showed concern about the media, and never about NGOs.

Personal field experiences aside, media exposés also figure prominently in many recent scholarly accounts documenting the emergence of ‘alternative’ and reformist capitalism, as seen in fair and ethical trade, multiple-stakeholder management practices, socially responsible mutual funds, and ‘triple-bottom-line’ accounting (Gereffi et al, 2001; Hughes, 2001a; Smith, 2000a; Sunley, 1999; Zadek, 1998). This literature acknowledges that media coverage of exploitation and abuse within global commodity chains—whether it precedes or (more often) bolsters NGO demands for reform—has influenced corporate investment, sourcing, and management practices in ways that, in turn, have potentially profound consequences for labor. Whether things change for the better (wage increases, improved benefits) or worse (factories shut, farms ‘delisted’), these stories about the ‘dark side’ of globalization make a difference to those who profit from it. Yet, to understand precisely how they inform the governance of food and other globalized commodities (Marsden, 2000) we need to consider how different kinds of stories have been made, and made powerful, by diverse networks of actors, from producers and journalists to ‘experts’, NGO activists, and anonymous sources (Fitzsimmons and Goodman, 1998; Szerszynski et al, 2000; Whatmore and Thorne, 1997). We also need to examine how their production not only takes different technical and discursive forms but also *takes place* within particular political-economic and regulatory contexts.

### **The super-marketing of consent?**

Given the well-established sociological critique of the mass media’s role in the ‘manufacture of consent’, one must clearly justify any claims about a positive synergy between the media and the work of agro-food advocacy groups (Gitlin, 1980; Herman and Chomsky, 1988). To do this I first briefly review the main points of this critique, and in particular Habermas’s argument about the mass media’s role in the demise of the ‘public sphere’. Although this argument has received deserved criticism by feminist scholars, among others (McLaughlin, 1993; Peters, 1993), I introduce it here because

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I believe it helps to highlight what is distinctive and new about agro-food media and politics in the United Kingdom.

The public sphere, as defined by Habermas, emerged in the 18th century, along with coffee houses and the independent literary press. As a realm of discourse and social interaction, it was exclusive and elitist—only the bourgeois and predominantly male ‘reading public’ belonged—but also critically engaged in debates both political and literary. The press contributed to the development of the public sphere in at least three ways: it provided information about events and ideas beyond readers’ immediate daily world, as well as a forum for debating those ideas, and its written content, by challenging them intellectually, improved their facility for criticism (Habermas, 1989, page 166).

The 20th-century mass media, however, had the reverse effect, precisely by becoming not only economically more accessible but ‘psychologically’ more accessible to a mass audience. In other words, it served up versions of the world that readers would find easy and appealing to consume, rather than challenging (Davis, 2002; Gitlin, 2000). Habermas holds particular scorn for the mass media’s expansive coverage of the ‘private sphere’—the ‘human-interest’ feature stories, the columns devoted to the day-to-day concerns of the home and heart. Such a focus not only displaces coverage of ‘publicly relevant developments’, it also fosters “sentimentality toward persons and corresponding cynicism toward institutions which ... naturally curtail the subjective capacity for rational criticism of public authority, even where it might objectively still be possible” (pages 171–172). It maintains a ‘culture-consuming’ (and thus uncritical) public rather than ‘culture-debating’ public (Habermas, 1989, page 159).

From the perspective of structuralist political economy, this easily digested media content reflects the profit-maximizing priorities of the mass media’s oligopolistic ownership—that is, to sell product and attract advertisers. These priorities are seen largely to determine the form and content of the mass media’s news coverage, as well as its targeting of particular socioeconomic ‘submarkets’ (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Herman and McChesney, 1997). Habermas sees this segmentation of the media-consuming public as yet one more blow to the public sphere.

In addition, the commercialization of the mass media has given rise to the “practice of public relations” (Habermas, 1989, page 193). Unlike advertising for specific products, a firm’s public relations ‘hides its business’ behind the pretense of concern for public welfare. It thus “creates and not only solidifies the profile of the brand and a clientele of consumers but mobilizes for the firm or branch or for an entire system a quasi-political credit, a respect of the kind one displays towards political authority” (Habermas, 1989, page 194). And, as other critics have argued at length, the very structures and labor processes of mass-media production help to reinforce this respect for political and corporate authority. Journalists’ training, acculturation, and need for ‘legitimate’ sources leads them to pursue and ‘frame’ the news in ways that reaffirm and thus help reproduce hegemonic ideologies (Hall, 1992). An opposition movement receives respectable coverage only insofar as it cultivates an image of newsworthy credibility—meaning that “its leaders are well mannered, its actions well ordered, and its slogans specific and ‘reasonable’” (Gitlin, 1980, pages 290–291).

On one level, contemporary Britain offers ample evidence to support these arguments. A handful of huge conglomerates own all the top national daily papers, and they market very different news to different socioeconomic strata (Sparks, 1999). Although the ‘quality’ broadsheets cover national and international affairs in considerable depth, the tabloids’ notorious taste for sleaze, gossip, and photographs of half-naked women has proven increasingly popular with newsstand buyers. The British Broadcasting Corporation, meanwhile, faces ever-fiercer competition from cable television and Rupert Murdoch,

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challenging its historical commitment to public-service-oriented programming (Chrisell, 1999; Hood, 1994). As the pressure on journalists to increase their output has made it all the more attractive to rely on public-relations materials for story content, so have public-relations firms become increasingly adept at pushing such materials (Aldridge, 1998). All these trends, British media critics argue, have strengthened the political clout of corporations that can afford to invest heavily in sophisticated spin (Davis, 2002).

For Britain's top supermarkets, the practice of public relations serves more than one purpose. Most broadly, it aims to justify their own market domination, which rivals that of the country's media moguls. In addition, supermarkets have long used informational public relations, such as in-store publications and labels providing recipes, nutritional advice, and anecdotes, to 'solidify' brand image and encourage customer loyalty. The line between public relations and advertising is clearly a fine one. This sort of corporate public relations, however, arguably has more influence in the United Kingdom than elsewhere, simply because the country's early industrialization and urbanization so thoroughly destroyed most of the traditional intragenerational and rural–urban channels of information about food, and state-provided alternatives (that is, school home-economics courses) never really compensated (Mennell, 1996). Britain's supermarkets are therefore perhaps especially well positioned to influence not just food choice in the narrow sense (Wrigley, 1998) but also popular norms about how food should be produced, packaged, and distributed.

In short, the political economies of oligopolistic media production and food retailing appear highly unfavorable for the development of an energetic, critical movement around 'ethical' food sourcing. Yet, this has in fact happened in Britain. I am not claiming that this is either a mass movement or a radical one (many of its goals are in fact fairly reformist), or that all its demands will be met. I do hope to show, however, that Britain's supermarkets have been pushed to demonstrate greater accountability to the critical public—as represented by the NGOs—than their counterparts just about anywhere else. We can better understand this development if we take a closer look at the relationships and representations that constitute the ethical complex of supermarkets. We need to consider, in other words, the relationships between NGOs and certain kinds of media actors, how these relationships have shaped the British mass media's coverage of food and agriculture, and how, in turn, Britain's corporate food retailers have had to overhaul the practice of public relations.

### **Cooking up trouble: the popular media and food politics**

First, as recent work in media studies emphasizes, we cannot assume that 'institutionalized' political and economic power assures the most *effective* access to the mass media (Davis, 2002). In Britain, activists' effective use of the popular media to challenge corporate food power in particular can arguably be traced back to the late 18th century, when antislavery groups took advantage of an emerging national press to advertise their petitions for 'slave-free' sugar (Drescher, 1987, page 70). The potential of mediagenic campaigning became apparent once again in the late 20th century, as new kinds of political actors mobilized around global-scale environmental issues (biodiversity, climate change, and rainforest destruction) and indigenous rights (Anderson, 1997; Smith, 2000b). NGOs such as Greenpeace and the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) helped make these problems big news; some of these same organizations have since become the media's most trusted sources on environmental matters. The NGOs won this role partly because the institutionalized authorities of government and big business, in the wake of disasters such as the Exxon Valdez and Brent Spar accidents, have lost credibility, but also because their own public relations have become more sophisticated, or at least more imaginative (Mormont and Dasnoy, 1995; Smith, 2000a). Drawing on

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their transnational networks, they have proven especially adept at making distant, abstract, and often scientifically complex problems both accessible and compelling (Darley, 2000).

Equally important, the specialist journalists who report on environmental issues, while professionally committed to 'objective' coverage, often consider themselves environmentalists, in one form or another (Smith, 2000b). This is certainly the case of some of Britain's best-known press and broadcast reporters on the environment and agriculture. They have informants and friends within these NGOs, and rely on them for the information and viewpoints needed for authoritative reportage. As one writer from Britain's Royal Society for the Protection of Birds observed, "the specialist journalists are on the same side and are looking to the NGOs to say the kinds of things that they can't" (Farrow, 2000).

Alongside and often overlapping with environmental reporting, the British mass-media's food coverage has also increased over the past few years. This is not simply because of the many food scares; as will be obvious to anyone who has watched television or browsed bookstores in the United Kingdom recently, the country's 'foodie' culture is flourishing, especially at the level of vicarious pleasure. Cooking shows featuring 'celebrity chefs' and exotic cuisines are particularly popular (Mead, 2001). Few viewers, it appears, actually prepare the dishes they see on television; supermarket managers claim that their customers more often come looking for 'ready-meal' versions. But the shows have communicated broader messages about the social and aesthetic value of cooking and eating well (Caraher et al, 2000; Miller and Reilly, 1995). In doing so, they have helped food activists "pitch arguments for the rethinking of food culture" (Tim Lang, Professor of Food Policy, City University, London, 2002, personal communication)

As in environmental journalism, many media actors who cover food also engage in food advocacy. Although the television chefs have tended to keep politics off their shows, some endorse causes indirectly, by appearing at NGO events or making statements via the press. The chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, for example, showed up at a Fairtrade Foundation pancake breakfast in early 2003, and was quoted saying that he sought out fair-trade products because they guaranteed "responsibility and traceability" (Durrant, 2003). Other politicized media actors include members of the Guild of Food Writers, an organization formed in 1984 to debate and speak out on issues such as genetically modified organisms, organics, and the crisis of British farming. Some of the guild's members are academics and have taken their food advocacy to parliament, but many are beat journalists or independent food writers who express their political views primarily through their writing or broadcast shows (for example, Harvey, 1997; Humphrys, 2002). In the late 1990s, as a number of NGOs stepped up the campaign for the relocalization of British food supply, the guild's members chimed in. As one opinion piece in a 1999 newsletter told fellow members: "it would be difficult to stop supermarkets from sourcing from abroad, but we can, and we must, direct consumers to buy more British food." Be sure, the writer urged, "to include that one important word BRITISH in your copy" (Lloyd-Davies, 1999).

So if NGOs lobby supermarkets for ethical sourcing, and sympathetic media actors relay their messages to the public, do these messages have any effect on those members of the public that the supermarkets care most about—namely their own customers and shareholders? Although my own fieldwork does not attempt to answer this question empirically, I pose it here to try to understand why the supermarkets have felt compelled to respond to organizations that do not claim to represent consumers or shareholders on a mass scale.

Quite a bit of research in the United Kingdom does suggest that magazines, in particular, influence public understanding about everything from nutrition to food

additives to ethnic cooking (Cook and Crang, 1996; Fine and Wright, 1991). The issue here, however, is not whether the popular media affects people's food shopping and eating habits, but rather how it makes them think about (and perhaps support) the organizations that want to change how, and from where, supermarkets get their food. In other words, the issue is not the effect of media discourses on consumption per se, but rather the effect on how consumers act (or at least think) as citizens—or what some would call critical consumerism (Gabriel and Lang, 1995).

That said, we can approach this question by drawing on recent work on 'reflexive' consumers, who profess concern about the environmental and social consequences of their purchases and at least sometimes buy premium-priced organic or fair-trade label products (DuPuis, 2000; Guthman, 2003). As Miller's work, discussed earlier, demonstrated, shoppers' ethical purchasing may be inconsistent and not very closely correlated with their professed concerns about, say, the environment or social justice. They may buy organic food, in particular, primarily because they believe it will benefit themselves and their loved ones, and only secondarily because it might benefit the earth (Miller, 2001, pages 111–144).

Reflexive consumers tend to be well educated, but that does not mean they hold doctorates in nutrition or ethics or agronomy. As with nutritional labels, therefore, much of the information that gives organic and fair-trade labels their meaning and value comes from the popular media, not from formal schooling. As mentioned earlier, stories that link the food on people's plates to environmental degradation and social injustices have appeared often in the British media in recent years, especially in the media mostly likely to have 'reflexive consumers' as an audience (such as *The Guardian*, and several BBC news and feature broadcasts). It seems likely that such stories, even if they have affected the shopping habits of only a very small minority, have left rather more people troubled about the ways their food is produced and traded, and thus supportive of organizations that are apparently trying to change things for the better.

All these points suggest that, although Habermas and other critics condemn the mass media's preoccupation with the private sphere, precisely this preoccupation with the most 'intimate commodity' (Winson, 1992) has helped pave the way for popular food movements. In other words, the late-20th-century mass media may in fact have increased its food coverage for primarily commercial reasons: because stories and shows about food sell papers, get high ratings, and presumably attract advertisers. Nonetheless, by keeping the spotlight on food—as a source of pleasure but also possible danger, and as a cultural but also industrial product—mass-media coverage has, I would argue, helped to legitimate the campaigns of NGOs working *through* food to change other things, such as labor conditions in distant supply regions. At the very least, it has changed how the supermarkets view the NGOs. As one long-time food activist put it, "they [the supermarkets] used to be very arrogant, and dismissed us with contempt—in a very charming way of course. But now they take the food troublemakers very seriously."

More precisely, the supermarkets have looked to certain 'troublemakers' to help legitimate their own extraordinarily powerful control over the nation's food supply. In terms of simple market share, this control has grown steadily over the past few decades (Marsden and Wrigley, 1996). The supermarkets' de facto regulatory power, however, increased dramatically after the passage of the 1990 Food Safety Act (see <http://www.foodstandards.gov.uk/foodindustry/regulation/foodlawguidebranch/foodlawguidech01/>), which required food businesses of all kinds to demonstrate 'due diligence' for the safety and quality of their products. For the top supermarkets, the law justified the use of private standards to discipline and impose costs on suppliers, provided the results benefited the 'consumer interest', as defined by the hygiene and quality of the product. This uncompromising control over suppliers only intensified after the 1996 BSE crisis,



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as supermarkets sought to distance themselves from the governments' own failures in food-safety regulation (Marsden et al, 2000).

As part of their legitimation efforts British supermarkets have also sought to respond rapidly, even preemptively, to 'stakeholder' concerns. In 1999, for example, they were amongst the first European retailers to ban genetically modified ingredients from their own-brand products. In mid-2002, one top supermarket commissioned background research on 'the food-miles issue', out of concern that a recently published NGO report marked the beginning of a new controversy.<sup>(3)</sup> Of course, it is impossible to preempt all potential threats to brand image; food miles became 'an issue' in the media partly because of the outbreak of the entirely unanticipated 2001 foot-and-mouth epidemic. Much of the immediate NGO and media analysis of the epidemic blamed its scope and rapid spread on the supermarkets' practice of trucking livestock long distances to centralized slaughterhouses. Even Tony Blair condemned their 'arm-lock' control over British farmers (Amhed and Ryle, 2001; Connor, 2001; Durham and Lean, 2001; Monbiot, 2001).

In short, the supermarkets occupy a powerful position in Britain's food supply, but one that has subjected them to intense scrutiny and criticism, and the perilous, ever-present possibility of a tarnished brand. Under conditions of oligopolistic competition, warding off such criticism has become an essential part of the practice of public relations. The actions taken towards that end, however, should not be dismissed as *merely* public relations. In some cases, as with the genetically modified organism ban and potentially the Ethical Trade Initiative described below, they have led to the restructuring or remapping of entire supply chains. In all cases, the supermarkets' efforts to appear socially responsible have depended on certain NGOs for information, advice, and public displays of approval, whether in the form of press releases, labels, or participation in the supermarkets' own reform initiatives.

For the NGOs, opportunities to influence the supermarkets also, of course, present opportunities to publicize and thus build support for their own activities. Indeed, their own brand images and revenues depend more directly on such public relations than do those of retailers, given that they have relatively few means of self-marketing. As one retailer's public-relations director said of the NGOs, "without media attention, they're dead. We're not dead. Thirty million people will continue to shop with us next week whether I'm on TV or not."

### **Locating the ethical complex**

The supermarkets' ethical complex is a condition informed by a tradition of British charity activism, and made especially visible by recent events. Yet it must also be understood in light of the fierce market pressures that make brand image so important to supermarkets, NGOs, and the media alike. These pressures have shaped the social dynamics and politics of the ethical complex in three distinct ways. First, as I have suggested, they have made the supermarkets and NGOs dependent on each other for certain kinds of legitimation, established partly through the mass media. Not surprisingly, many actors view their relationships with the 'other side' ambivalently. Those in retailing and importing sometimes ridicule the NGOs in one sentence, then praise them in the next. NGO actors emphasize that their cooperation with big business is strategic, not ideological: a means towards an end.

Second, competition for members, donors, and clients influences the relationships between the NGOs campaigning for supermarket reform, albeit not in any straightforward fashion. On one hand, the sheer number of British groups that have become

<sup>(3)</sup> The report was published by Sustain (2001).

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involved in agro-food activism in recent years has made it harder but also more necessary for individual groups to get credit (partly via media coverage) for campaign accomplishments. On the other hand, such groups hardly operate in an atomistic fashion. More than one hundred of them belong to Sustain, the ‘alliance for better food and farming’; many also take part in transnational advocacy networks (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Many of the core activists have long collaborated on campaigns around very different issues, from animal welfare to food poverty to biodiversity, and continue to rely on the resulting friendships and shared knowledge base (Lang, 1997). So competition and ideological conflict between NGOs—and we shall see evidence of both in the following section—do not preclude cooperation (Meyer and Whittier, 1994).

Third, and most importantly, although universalist and globalized discourses pervade the ethical complex, both the supermarkets and the NGOs actually sell their ethical images to national or subnational markets—that is, to their customers, shareholders, and supporters in Britain. There, not just a distinctive national media but also particular events and moral precepts have conditioned the priorities and practices of the ethical complex. The country’s late-1990s food scares, for starters, drew media attention towards the injustices suffered by Britain’s own food producers, consumers, and rural environment, and helped build support for initiatives to renationalize and relocalize the country’s food supply. Again, the sentiments behind such initiatives are neither new (Massingham, 1945) nor unique to the United Kingdom. In many parts of the world, ‘globalization and its discontents’ have fueled movements seeking either to revitalize national or regional cuisines (as in the Slow Food Movement) and/or to ‘reconstruct the local’ (as in the countless programs sponsoring farmers’ markets, community gardens, and subscription agriculture) (Allen et al, 2003; Hinrichs, 2000; Murdoch and Miele, 1999; Parrott et al, 2002; Whatmore and Thorne, 1997).

But in few places have the globalizing ambitions of powerful agro-food interests done more graphically awful damage than in Britain, where such ambitions discouraged the state from acting quickly to stop the spread of mad cow disease, then pushed it to slaughter and incinerate rather than vaccinate millions of livestock during the 2001 foot-and-mouth outbreak. Media portrayals of a national food supply besieged by corporate greed as much as by natural disaster—summed up most aptly in *The Guardian*’s online special report “What is wrong with *our* food?” (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/food/0,2759,178225,00.html>, my emphasis)—fueled food nationalism even as it destroyed public confidence in the national state’s food regulators. All this has benefited NGO campaigns focused on the health of *British* farming and its foodstuffs. It has also pushed some traditionally internationalist NGOs to participate in such campaigns.

In addition, because the NGOs and the supermarkets market their brand images primarily to a domestic public, their standards of ethical working conditions, although based on internationally recognized human-rights conventions, have so far been implemented in accordance with that public’s presumed moral codes, which are more openly partial. As Smith puts it, such codes are made up of “the ethics people actually discuss and practice” (1998, page 17). They arise in particular historical and geographic circumstances, meaning not only in particular places but also in relationships with other peoples, both past (such as colonialism) and present. These relationships condition how those peoples “are understood, represented, and regarded as possible subjects of moral responsibility” (page 17). As we will see, the supermarkets’ ethical reforms presume that the relationship between Britain’s critical public and the distant peoples who produce their food is one of limited knowledge but also strong feelings about what constitute moral or immoral labor practices. I say *presume* because I am not making claims about what these publics really believe. Rather I want to emphasize that the

very political economy of these ethical-reform campaigns places certain limits on their universalism.

## The ethical advocates

### Christian Aid and the Ethical Trade Initiative

As both an aid agency and an advocacy group, Christian Aid's primary objective is fighting poverty, primarily in the global South. Of all the NGOs profiled here, Christian Aid adheres most closely to the activist tradition established by church-based charities in the antislavery movement (Drescher, 1987). Unlike most of its predecessors, however, the group backs up its advocacy—which in recent years has covered issues ranging from international debt to biotechnology—with in-depth reports, produced by a globally networked research staff and then aggressively publicized through the popular media. In the mid-1990s Christian Aid researchers investigated labor conditions in British supermarkets' African and Latin American supply regions, intending to use media work to spark a mass grassroots campaign to 'Change the Rules' of supermarket sourcing. They found abundant examples of abuse (intimidation and unfair sackings of workers, unpaid overtime, pesticide exposure) as well as useful factoids (for example: it would take fifteen centuries for a South African fruit-farm laborer to earn the annual salary of Tesco's chief executive officer), all of which appeared in *The Global Supermarket* (Orton and Madden, 1996). The report "got a lot of column inches and broadcasts", according to a Christian Aid staffer. It thus laid the ground for stage two, 'the great receipt-collection campaign'. The group urged consumers to send it all their supermarket receipts, as evidence of their buying power. It collected and sorted by store more than 17 million pounds worth of receipts in two years. Staffers dressed in 'media-friendly' fruit and vegetable costumes then presented them publicly to store managers. According to the group's campaigns director, the events "generated more local media coverage than anything in Christian Aid history", which dates back 50 years.

Some individuals working in the fresh-produce supply chains targeted by the report later described it as unprofessional and counterproductive, because its exposé of child labor in Peru led to the quick delisting of a supplier, and the loss of hundreds of Peruvian jobs. But the overall campaign accomplished its purpose: the top supermarkets soon agreed to join the Ethical Trade Initiative (ETI), an 'alliance' of companies, NGOs, and trade unions formally established in 1998, with support from the British government. The ETI 'Base Code' has since been incorporated into the supermarket protocols used to audit horticultural suppliers as well as to evaluate potential new ones. Unlike fair-trade certification, which assures above-market prices to small-scale producers who in turn demonstrate commitment to community development and environmental sustainability, the ETI expects its member companies' suppliers to comply with International Labor Organization standards.<sup>(4)</sup> Although the Base Code is in principle applicable to any kind of commodity-producing workplace, it is more suited to commercial rather than household enterprises. And although the ETI aims to improve labor conditions around the world in both manufacturing and agriculture, its supermarket members have made African horticulture one of their top priorities; the Base Code was first piloted in Zimbabwe (the site, perhaps not coincidentally, of *Mangetout*).

For Christian Aid, the supermarkets' willingness to join the ETI marked a triumph. It showed that savvy media work combined with concrete reform proposals could, in fact,

<sup>(4)</sup> The ETI Base Code has nine main provisions: (1) employment is freely chosen; (2) freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining are respected; (3) working conditions are safe and hygienic; (4) child labor shall not be used; (5) living wages are paid; (6) working hours are not excessive; (7) no discrimination is practised; (8) regular employment is provided; (9) no harsh or inhumane treatment is allowed (<http://www.ethicaltrade.org/pub/about/eti/main/index.shtml>).

win significant concessions from image-conscious corporate retailers. In contrast to campaigns centered on consumer boycotts, this one gained Christian Aid a 'place at the table'. As a member of the ETI board (along with NGOs such as Oxfam, the Fairtrade Foundation, and Anti-Slavery International), it could both participate in the development of ethical standards and monitor the supermarkets' progress towards implementation. Companies that lagged behind risked another bout of bad publicity.

Yet the implementation of ethical standards has had ambiguous consequences in Zambia's horticultural export industry (Freidberg, 2003). First, the supermarkets have opted for a strict interpretation of the 'no child labor' provision in the ETI Base Code, meaning that teenagers under sixteen can no longer help their mothers pick vegetables after school, even though this extra revenue had previously helped pay school fees. Nor can horticultural farms offer jobs to any of Zambia's huge numbers of teenage AIDS orphans. Supermarket middle managers were well aware that the child-labor ban was not necessarily appropriate to all local circumstances—especially on a continent where children so commonly work on farms—but said that they could not count on either the British media or consumers to appreciate this fact. The protection of brand image, in other words, dictated a hard-line stance on hot-button issues, one of which was child labor.

Second, the supermarkets expect suppliers to bear the costs of improved worker welfare, but have not offered them higher prices. The resulting cost-price squeeze (exacerbated by the costs of increasingly stringent food safety standards) has helped to convince most of the industry's outgrowers to abandon horticultural export crops altogether. They have resumed less closely monitored commercial activities, such as dairy farming. As such activities are invariably less labor intensive, each outgrowers' decision has meant the loss of anywhere from dozens to hundreds of field workers' jobs. If current events in Zambia reflect broader trends—and research elsewhere suggests that they do (Du Toit, 2001; Hughes, 2001b)—ethical production will become unaffordable to all but the largest, best-capitalized operations. In Africa, such ethical enclaves would hardly represent a great advance for agrarian labor.

A third problem with the supermarkets' version of ethical trade is that, unlike organic or fair-trade certification, it has no label. Instead, the supermarkets have used their membership in the ETI to claim the ethical mantle for their entire corporate identity, not just the few goods produced in compliance with ETI standards. This precludes the possibility of charging a premium for those goods (a premium that could help pay for better working conditions and wages back on the farm) because without labels they offer consumers no identifiable added value. The 'improved labor conditions' promised by ETI remain abstract and placeless. Only a consumer who took the trouble to study ETI and supermarket policy documents could determine which products are supposed to be ethically traded.

Christian Aid's 'Change the Rules' campaign, in tacit recognition that the ETI alone can hardly solve the larger inequities and injustices of North–South trade, has shifted its focus to the reform of World Trade Organization legislation. The new campaign poses new challenges, partly because of the complexity of the issues (international trade law does not lend itself to sound-bite explanations) but also because it identifies Christian Aid as one of the more 'globophile' NGOs. As the next case study demonstrates, this stance has plenty of opponents.

Yet the Christian Aid campaign director recalled that even the imminently accessible supermarket campaign posed challenges to the group's brand profile, simply because so many other NGOs were working on similar issues. "There's loads of competition for members and profile", he said, and to compete effectively NGOs need media coverage.

So Christian Aid employs about twenty people in its press office, many of them former journalists with extensive personal connections in press and broadcast networks.

### **Race to the Top and ‘brokered engagement’**

The Institute for International Environment and Development’s ‘Race to the Top’ (RTTT) project aims to “track supermarket progress towards a greener and fairer food system” (<http://www.racetothetop.org/>). Even compared with Christian Aid’s campaign, this project expects a great deal from Britain’s top food retailers. Drawing on the expertise of diverse activists and academics (as well as foundation and government funding), it has developed benchmarks for grading supermarkets in seven different areas of performance, ranging from animal welfare to public health to terms of trade with farmers. It produces ‘objective data and analysis’ for use by policymakers, investors, campaigners, consumers, and, not least, the supermarkets themselves. Although the project publicizes the data, its directors emphasize that their aim is brokered engagement, not naming and shaming. For that reason some traditionally confrontational groups, such as Friends of the Earth, declined to join the alliance. But twenty-four others did, providing an otherwise relatively obscure and technocratic initiative with much-needed brand recognition.<sup>(5)</sup>

These organizations lent their logos and advice to the RTTT because they wanted to show support for the basic premise and methods, not because they necessarily agree with all the goals. The fair-trade organizations and Worldwide Fund for Nature, for example, want retailers to help small farmers in the global South find reliable and remunerative markets for their ‘environmentally friendly’ crops (such as shade-grown coffee and organic produce); they also want farmworkers assured a living wage and stable employment. The ‘green’ and ‘countryside’ groups, on the other hand, want supermarkets to source more fresh produce (*especially* organic produce) from British farmers. The green ‘relocalizers’ reserve particular criticism for the supermarkets’ air-freight fresh-produce supply chains, because they consume the most fuel and generate the most pollution (relative to oceanic and road transport), and deliver predominantly luxury commodities. According to these groups’ environmental ethics, the revenue that such commodities might bring to producers in poor countries does not justify their place in the British food supply. And the ‘countryside’ groups agree, despite their differences with the greens on other issues (such as fox hunting). In short, the RTTT member organizations adhere to quite different normative geographies of work in food. As a result, some of the project’s benchmarks of supermarket performance contradict each other.

As of mid-2003, six supermarket chains had agreed to participate in the RTTT (the Co-op, Iceland, Marks and Spencer, Safeway, Sainsbury’s, and Somerfield) and another four were considering it. As a supermarket representative told one of the directors of the project, “we need you”. ‘We’ has two meanings here. First, as discussed earlier, supermarkets in general need the NGOs to legitimate their own formidable power over the food supply.

Second, ‘we’ also refers to the supermarket employees who are responsible for company environmental and ethical policies, and who meet with NGOs representatives, the media, and other stakeholders as part of their jobs. These individuals often

<sup>(5)</sup> These include the British Independent Fruit Growers’ Association, the Centre for Food Policy, Compassion in World Farming, the Countryside Agency, Council for the Protection of Rural England, English Nature, Fairtrade Foundation, Farm Animal Welfare Network, Farmers Link, Forum for the Future, Marine Conservation Society, Marine Stewardship Council, National Federation of Women’s Institutes, New Economics Foundation, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Small and Family Farms Alliance, Sustain, Traidcraft Exchange, Transport 2000, Transport and General Workers’ Union, Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers Union, World Society for the Protection of Animals, and WWF-UK. The Soil Association joined the RTTT in May 2003.

express sympathy for their NGOs' goals; some have worked in the voluntary sector themselves. Still, they have to sell the NGOs' case to their budget-conscious superiors, and, to help them do that, the RTTT director said, "We try to strengthen their own arm within the institution." More specifically, they try to convince each company that participation in the 'race' will be worthwhile, not least because it will help them protect and improve brand image. As one importer said of the NGOs, "There is very good potential for getting into bed with these sort of people, using standards that they drew up, and using their public profile in your own favor." Of course, the supermarkets want to get into bed only with NGOs that have already established a positive, well-defined public profile, which depends at least partly on how well and how much they appear in the media. Fortunately for the NGOs, the very process of brokered engagement offers new opportunities for coverage—that is, they might win column inches not just in the newspapers' front sections, but also on the consumer, 'lifestyle', and business pages (Farrow, 2000, page 195).

#### **The Soil Association and the 'ethically traded organic' label**

Since founding the British organics movement in 1946, the Soil Association (SA)<sup>(6)</sup> has become not just one of the country's most quoted and influential voices in all kinds of food and agricultural policy debates, but also its largest organic-certifier agency, and therefore its most visible organic label. The SA's chair boasts of its "regular contact with the media, who see it as a reliable source of information in a haze of biotech and agribusiness spin." In addition, "the SA communicates with Government on all levels": the charismatic director Patrick Holden met repeatedly with Tony Blair during the 2001 foot-and-mouth crisis, and claims to be on familiar terms with the SA's 'Royal Patron', Prince Charles. An SA director served on the 'future of food and farming' commission in 2001–02, helping to assure that the commission's final report endorsed many of the SA's goals. In short, although a dozen accredited agencies vie for organic-certification business in the United Kingdom, the SA claims to be *the* scientific and moral authority on organics, and therefore that its own label the best guarantee of "food you can trust" (Reed, 2001).

The top supermarkets, at least, have bought this claim, for they look to the SA not just to certify their organic suppliers (both in the United Kingdom and abroad) but also to help them build and meet consumer demand in this lucrative market. Some of the ties between the SA and the supermarkets run deep: the 'organic-integrity' managers of Holden and Sainsbury's have been friends for twenty years. Sainsbury's sponsors events such as the SA's annual national conference, which is typically attended by several of the retailer's employees.

What does all this have to do with ethical working conditions in Africa, or for that matter anywhere else? Historically, not much. The SA's organic standards, although considered amongst the world's strictest in their agro-ecological and animal-welfare specifications, do not mention labor. But recall the aforementioned shortcomings of the ETI: no price premium for producers, and no label and thus no added value for consumers. The SA's label offers both, but only because the SA has promoted the value of organics by (as one importer put it) 'running after microphones' year after year.

"They do a fantastic job highlighting their organization and their cause ... as a result, 10 or more years later, people trust them because they've got a consistent message ... and historically, they've proven to be right. There are issues and concerns about the environment, about pesticides, about people's health. Foot-and-mouth and BSE,

<sup>(6)</sup> In addition to the interviews and press coverage analysis mentioned in footnote (2), the discussion of the SA draws on analyses of its own publications and publicity materials, as well as participation in the organization's annual conference in January 2002.

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these are things that wouldn't have happened if the organic standards had been adhered to. And so when they run up to the microphone in the middle of a crisis ... the message grips in. When they start saying sensible things now, people start paying attention to them."

This importer argues that the supermarkets' claims to ethical trade will be credible and sustainable only if they give responsibility for standards and certification to just this kind of third party: not an upstart commercial agency, but a trusted brand-name charity. That way, "Joe Public understands what the standard's about, and is even prepared to pay a premium for it."

As it happens, the SA branched out into ethics in 2001, when it drafted standards for a new 'ethically traded organic' (ETO) label. According to SA staffers, the initial demand for such a label came not from consumers or SA members but rather from companies such as Green & Black's. Its products already bore both SA and Fairtrade Foundation labels, but the company sought a 'broader and deeper' form of certification.

And, indeed, the ETO draft standards were deep, although vague on some points. They included provisions for a fair price, but no notion of a fixed bottom price, a standard feature of fair trade. The ETO standards also covered *all* ingredients and all parts of a supply chain, whereas the fair-trade designation on, say, a chocolate bar covers only the on-farm production of cacao. Some critics in the NGO community pointed out that producers in the global South would be hard-pressed to demonstrate compliance with such complex standards. Then again, the global South was not necessarily the target market, because the ETO standards included a 'recommended best practice' of local (meaning UK-based) sourcing.

This conflation of *ethical* and *local* reflects not only ecological concerns (again, the food-miles argument) but also the SA's long-standing allegiance to British agriculture (Conford, 2001). For, although its organic-certification agency earns revenue both in the United Kingdom and abroad, it generates much more media coverage and political support from campaigns and events supporting British farmers. Indeed, the SA's highly successful 'Eat organic! Buy local!' publicity campaign, launched in October 2001, even prompted a telephone call from the government's Department for International Development (DFID). DFID was concerned, according to an SA staffer, that the SA was undermining DFID's own efforts to sell British citizens on the development benefits of international trade.

Ultimately the SA never brought its ETO label to market. Instead, in January 2003 it devoted its annual conference to the theme 'Fair trade begins at home', and announced a joint venture with the Fairtrade Foundation to develop, on a trial basis, an organic-and-fair label. This one would be available to British producers, provided they demonstrated commitment to invest in their local communities. Whatever behind-the-scenes politicking influenced the SA's decision to collaborate with the Fairtrade Foundation rather than to develop its own label, both NGOs publicly emphasized that the joint venture posed 'many challenges', as much political as logistical (Fairtrade Foundation, 2003). On the one hand, the Fairtrade Foundation wanted the label to continue to express solidarity with producers in the global South, and appreciation for the particular hardships they faced. On the other hand, the SA intended to use the new label to certify 'primarily UK' products. Whether the two groups could reconcile their geographically distinct loyalties remained an open question.

It was also unclear whether they would even be able to convince the supermarkets to stock fair-and-organic products. After all, competition for shelf space was fierce, and the retailers had no patience for inconsistencies in supply quality or quantity. Would they make room for yet another charity initiative? One longtime SA staffer expressed frank (and, for the SA, uncharacteristic) uncertainty. It ultimately depends, as he put it,

“on how much media interest we generate when we launch.” In other words, it was taken for granted that the media coverage would determine the supermarket response.

### Conclusion

How do NGOs such as the SA generate and maintain this all-important ‘media interest’? More broadly, what sorts of practices and social relationships have enabled them to use the corporate mass media to advance their campaigns for corporate reform? Although studies of environmental press coverage have approached this question anecdotally (Mormont and Dasnoy, 1995; Smith, 2000b), it surely merits more systematic ethnographic research.

One of the main objectives of this paper has been to provide reasons and direction for such an inquiry. I have done this by showing how certain NGOs, together with the popular media, participate in the ethical complex that drives British supermarkets’ ongoing efforts to demonstrate socially responsible supply-chain governance (Marsden, 2000). I have argued that these NGOs’ political clout lies not in any claims to represent the *mass* public but rather in their ability to convince the media and retailers alike that they speak to and for the *critical* public, in the two senses of the term: that is, the public that are both critical of the retailers’ sourcing practices and, as consumers, critical to their sales.

Another objective of this paper has been to question the geographic scope, both actual and potential, of NGO campaigns for better working conditions in overseas commodity-production zones. The case studies have shown that even the most internationalist NGOs, as political, fund-raising actors, cannot afford to ignore the localized concerns and sympathies of their domestic constituencies. Thus the NGOs’ ethics of universal justice, once codified and implemented, have tended to reflect these constituencies’ rather less universal moral priorities. This tendency is neither new nor surprising. Rather, it resonates with what Evans calls the ‘Polanyi problem’ of globalized capital, both past and present: that is, the failure of ‘protective movements’ to regulate capital very effectively beyond the national level (Evans, 2000). Put somewhat differently: even though the movement for supermarket ethical reform has taken shape within particular historical conditions, the basic moral-geographic challenges it faces—of stretching public empathy and political commitment beyond those nearest and dearest—are clearly not unique [as Harvey’s discussion of militant particularism makes clear (1996)]. Can NGOs and the media spin globalization stories that address this challenge? This question becomes increasingly important as more and more trade stretches into regions where the microphones do not.

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