

'West' and 'North': Metageography in ethical trade communication

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My doctoral project is curious about ethical trade communication in Poland and Finland. Broadly speaking, it is interested in how the ‘ethics’ of ethical trade is conveyed to a wider society. I conceptualise ethical trade as an ethical relationship that consumers in the ‘Global North’ can form with deprived commodity producers in the ‘Global South’. This relationship is mediated in that consumers can connect to producers primarily by means of mediated representations – visual, textual and otherwise – and meta-representations, usually generated and circulated by ethical trade organisations operating in their country. Moreover, given the impossibility of ‘knowing’ every individual producer, the figure of ‘Southern producer’ becomes sort of a universalised icon with whom consumers can build a symbolic ethical relationship. Thus formulated, ethical trade becomes a communication problem: it relies on a moral disposition that, rather than being intrinsic to some people and not to others, must be constructed through careful communication efforts of ethical trade organisations.¹

In this paper, I tentatively explore the divergent ‘metageographies’ whose overlapping has a more or less tangible impact on ethical trade communication. Mindful of the shortcomings of Lewis and Wigen’s analysis², I still consider their notion of ‘metageography’ as useful shorthand for describing ‘mental maps’ which group people and places into ‘pseudo-geographical’ categories based on some arbitrarily selected criteria. The principal metageography of ethical trade draws a homogenising ‘equatorial’ axis between the ‘Global North’, that is a ‘hemisphere’ of consumption, wealth and privilege, and the ‘Global South’ – a ‘hemisphere’ of production, poverty and deprivation. This sweeping metageography, which curiously has not been problematized in the academic discourses of ethical trade, overlooks the

¹ See L Chouliaraki (2013) *The Ironic Spectator*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 2 for a reference to solidarity as a communication problem, which inspired my approach.

² MW Lewis and KE Wigen (1997) *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

traditional ‘vertical’ division that splits the ‘North’ into ‘West’ and ‘East’ with their divergent cultures, political systems and economic statuses. I illustrate the conceptual argument for unsettling the conventional metageography of ethical trade with extracts from the empirical material collected in the course of a year-long fieldwork that zoomed in on ethical trade movement in Poland and Finland.

During my fieldwork, I observed that Polish ethical trade organisations were much more vigilant than their Finnish counterparts about the potential negative reception among the general public of their message that insisted on moral obligations towards Southern producers as distant others. The stronger resistance towards ethical trade in the Polish society has been attributed in the academic literature to the more limited economic resources³, to the inadequacy of global education⁴ or to the late democratisation and underdevelopment of the civil society.⁵ Yet, I argue that all the above circumstances are singular symptoms of a more general condition that is the semi-peripheral position of Poland in the global economic, political and cultural system. In Finland, on the other hand, a much more deep-seated ‘Westernness’ of the society results in somewhat easier acceptance of ethical trade as a cause worth of attention and action.

To elucidate this point, I employ the vocabulary of the world-system theory. Thus, the ‘West’ describes the ‘centre’ understood as a collection of core countries that possess the largest economic capital and for which the participation in the global market has been the most

³ See K Boenning (2009) The Introduction of Fair Trade in Poland: Opportunities and Challenges. *BANWA* 6(2): 87-98; and M Koszewska (2011) The Ecological and Ethical Consumption Development Prospects in Poland Compared with the Western European Countries. *Comparative Economic Research* 14(2): 101-123.

⁴ Ibid. and A Paliwoda-Matiolańska (2014) Konsumeryzm świadomy społecznie w Polsce [Conscious consumerism in Poland]. *Marketing i Rynek* 2014(8): 1204-1210.

⁵ See G Makowski (2010) Civil society in Poland – challenges and prospects. In J Kucharczyk and J Zbieranek (eds) *Democracy in Poland 1989-2009. Challenges for the future*. Warsaw: Institute of Public Affairs, pp. 115-127.

beneficial.⁶ The firm location among the core nations explains the wide(r) acceptance of ethical trade in the Finnish society who largely see themselves as unequivocal ‘winners’ of the global economic games, despite the historically ‘peripheral’ character of the country.

The European ‘East’, in turn, can be described as ‘semi-periphery’. This view positions Poland between the ‘centre’ (‘West’) and the ‘periphery’ (‘South’) in the global division of labour.⁷ In other words, while dominated by the ‘centre’ – usually in the form of transnational corporations rooted in the core nations – Poland still functions as a financial oppressor of the ‘periphery’. Given this ‘dual’ positioning, the arbitrary incorporation into the, supposedly wealthy and benevolent, ‘Global North’ does not chime with self-orientalisation of (the factions of) the semi-peripheral Polish society, which has deeply internalised the view of itself as culturally ‘Eastern’, politically immature and economically underdeveloped.⁸

Thus, while Polish and Finnish ethical trade organisations seemingly strive to mobilise societies around the conventional, arguably Western-centric, metageography of ethical trade, their communication practices are nevertheless anchored in and accountable to more nuanced economic, political and cultural conditions in their respective societies. In conclusion, the prescriptive and unproblematised North-South metageography of ethical trade is out of tune with how different ‘Northern’ organisations communicate and, indeed, conceptualise the position of their countries in the world-system and the obligations that such position entails.

⁶ T Zarycki (2014) *Ideologies of Eastness in Central and Eastern Europe*. London: Routledge.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See J Grzymiski (2010) O powrocie Polski do Europy. przyczynek do rekonceptualizacji dyktomii centrum-peryferie [On the return of Poland to Europe. A contribution to reconceptualisation of the centre-periphery dichotomy]. *Kultura i Polityka* 7(2010): 68-82. For similar conclusions regarding the whole Central/Eastern Europe see, for example, M Kuus (2004) Europe’s Eastern Expansion and the Reinscription of Otherness in East-Central Europe. *Progress in Human Geography* 28(4): 472-489.