

SECTION 2 CANDIDATE'S PROPOSED RESEARCH (TO BE COMPLETED BY THE APPLICANT)

Title of research topic

New moral economic networks in Palermo, Sicily: fairtrade and organic agriculture between 'alternative logics', agency and local constraints.

Please give a description of your proposed research topic including the questions or hypotheses to be addressed, the methods to be used, the sources to be consulted and a brief timetable covering the period of study. If you intend to undertake any period of fieldwork overseas you should include details of what this will entail and how it fits into the timetable for your period of study. Please mention how you expect your research to be useful, and to whom. Do not attach additional material as this will be discarded. You are strongly advised to refer to Section 1.42-1.51 of the above notes. Your answer should not exceed 3 pages, be set at a minimum 10 font type and margins a minimum 1.27 cm.

Research Ethics and confidentiality

(See Section 1.41-1.51 of the above notes)

Are there particular ethical considerations which arise in the design or conduct of the proposed research?

Yes	
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If you have answered yes above, please address this explicitly in the description of your proposed research topic.

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH TOPIC

Research summary

This project will examine how the people involved in fairtrade retailing and organic agriculture in Palermo negotiate forms of work that consciously attempt to integrate new moral and ethical values with their economic activities. My hypothesis is that groups in late-industrial societies respond to a perceived disembeddedness of the economy by developing what they label 'moral economies' as a new form of embeddedness (Polanyi 1957) that incorporates both social justice and environmental sustainability. However, the actual socio-economic constraints all actors face (e.g. class, gender, education) are seldom taken into account in this process, raising questions about how far this new concept of 'moral economy' can be applied. My principal site will be a fairtrade shop in Palermo, from which I will closely interact with one of its neighbouring organic suppliers and an alternative trade organization (ATO). The research will address the following questions:

- Are values of 'fairness', 'sustainability', 'social justice' etc. (informing what groups see as a new economic paradigm) elements of a discourse that makes claims to universality, similar to those assumed for dominant market models? An ethnographic approach will provide in-depth understanding of local interpretations of such contested categories, which underline new ideas of economic embeddedness.
- What contradictions emerge between an ethical approach to the economy and the requirements of the market in relation to the social and economic contexts of Palermo and Sicily? The research will explore the practical and symbolic ways through which efficiency, profit, market competition and regional and state policy are managed *locally*, vis-à-vis the declared commitment to global sustainability and equity typical of fairtrade and organic farming.
- In what ways do different sets of relationships (e.g. neighbourhood, kinship, politics) support and/or impede the fairtrade and organic sectors in Palermo? The research will explore the multiple relations and practices through which the enterprises recruit workers, customers, suppliers, and the different 'moral' repertoires giving content to them, as well as the effects of such repertoires on the enterprises and on the relations themselves.

This research thus deals with the intersections, continuities and disjunctures between agency, as expressed through individual experience and social structures and networks, with the complexity of locality and the globalisation of markets and economic discourses. The project will make significant contributions to the anthropological literature on the embeddedness of economic relations (Granovetter 1985; Krippner 2001) and on current local-global dynamics (Miller 1995; Grimes 2005).

New moral economies through the lens of Sicily

In recent years, the need to redress the world economic system's shortcomings has been persistently voiced. Such claims often derive from the current wealth of initiatives acting in late-industrial societies as both cultural movements *and* economic schemes, as are fairtrade and organic agriculture. These are seen as following supposedly non-capitalist principles which would "bring together again" production, trade and consumption, and shift the economic cycle "in favour of society and nature". The need to practise both is increasingly stressed: linking fairtrade's claim to redress unequal trade at the international level with that of organic farming to alter unsustainable production at the local level (Raynolds 2000). Together, these practices would take the shape of 'moral' economic networks, embedded in social justice and environmental sustainability as opposed to profit maximization, allegedly creating an alternative to capitalism (Sayer 2000).

Values such as 'equality', 'non-profit' and 'nature' informing new definitions of economic embeddedness, reveal the positionality of those who make such claims within networks stretching across the boundaries of state and market, into what are termed the 'third sector and civil society' typical of Europe's late-industrial nations (Salamon & Anheier 1997). Current analyses of the third sector show that its rate of growth exceeds national economic averages in many countries (Ben-Ner & Gui 2002). But, while the phenomenon has expanded and shaped new forms of participation (such as networks), its social complexities often go unnoticed. For example, participation is *unevenly* distributed, both internationally and across sections of a population, as it closely tracks political and economic disparities within European states in the 21st century (Edwards et al. 2001). This observation is in

accordance with what anthropological and economic research shows and what the concept of 'network economies' originally pointed out: capitalism is not as monolithic as is often assumed; national, regional and local particularities can all be detected in one single setting (Piore & Sabel 1984). Civil society also needs to be problematised through careful, localised scrutiny. Given the above, the idea of a singular 'alternative' model is highly questionable, especially in relation to my site.

The possibility of economic networks relying on the third sector and civil society in Palermo (as are fairtrade and organic farming) is problematic. Italy's position in the world-system is well known for its regional differentiation, the disparity between the north and the south (the 'Southern Question') being the main characteristic of its politico-economic profile (Davis 1996). Historically, Sicily has been a focal point in this respect (Schneider & Schneider 1976). Theories regarding the embeddedness of economic activities have played a constant, if changing, role in explaining this state of affairs. Although couched in deterministic terms in the past, recent research has acknowledged the importance of specific patterns of *social organization* in developing Italy's different economic formations, especially with regards to small-medium enterprises (Bagnasco 1977). Palermo has been seen as negatively affected by its socio-cultural characteristics: lacking horizontal, community ties, blocked by vertical, clientelistic relations (see Chubb 1982). This raises questions about the third sector's role in the area and the activities relying on it (Trigilia 1996). Claims for a moral economy coming from a highly educated, affluent middle class, which acts as the new 'civil society', might well be problematic in sites of marked inequalities like Sicily (e.g. Schneider & Schneider 1996).

'Alternative economic agency' and local constraints in Palermo

Drawing on these considerations, I will analyse not only specific understandings of 'alternative' economies linked to fairtrade and organic farming in Palermo, but also how those engaged in these activities cope with the regional constraints (e.g. class, gender, education) originating in southern Italy's socio-economic context.

Fairtrade and organic agriculture are common examples of the trend towards reasserting a moral basis for the economy. Fairtrade promotes the re-embedding of commodity circulation and consumption in 'equitable social relations'; the organic movement, that of crop production in 'sustainable processes'. The two play a role both at the material *and* symbolic level (Ray & Sayer eds 1999). They relate a complex set of themes from political economy and ecology (e.g. 'equity', 'environment', 'development') to new ideas of economic embeddedness, which, in turn, inform practices of production, circulation and consumption at different sites between North and South. In the North, concerns over the sustainability of agriculture materialize through production and consumption respectively in 'green-minded' enterprises and lifestyles; worries about global inequality are embodied through trade and consumption by non-profit organizations and activist groups. These 'alternative economic logics' represent, for those involved, the core of what they see as moral economic networks (Goodman 2004).

I will thus examine the symbolic repertoire underpinning the agency of the people involved in Palermo's enterprises: e.g. 'fairness', 'activism', 'nature', 'solidarity'. How are different meanings related in the city's fair-trade and organic schemes? I will look for significant patterns or hierarchies of meaning, to see how they affect the schemes' activities in the city. Particular attention will be paid to *local* perceptions regarding the transformations of the economy. How do those engaged see themselves in these wider trends? Are there any differences, possibly contradictions, between owners, workers, volunteers, customers and suppliers? Fairtrade's challenge to capitalism is mobilised around 'alternative terms of trade'; however, attempts to engage with chainstores are seen by its grass-roots groups as mimicking for-profit practices. The organic movement, embracing local produce *and* out-of-season commodities from the global South, is challenged by green groups precisely on issues of sustainability. Fairtrade foods, which are all Southern commodities, increasingly become organic. Such multiple levels of contradictions in what those working in the two movements refer to as moral economies will be explored.

I will look at the different networks involved in fairtrade and organic agriculture in Palermo: e.g. local NGOs, student groups, social forums and church groups, with a view to exploring the sources and dynamics of the interconnections between them (Edelman 2001). Research along these lines will allow me to assess the ways in which the local social milieu influences, and is influenced by, actors of 'alternative' economic spheres. I will investigate what factors influence the kinds of ownership in place for the different initiatives. What causes a fairtrade shop, an organic farm or an ATO to have single owners, to be cooperatives, non-profit associations? I will then explore the link between different forms of ownership and how labour is organised and understood. Is labour voluntary, part-time or full-time? Is it local or migrant? What networks of recruitment are activated: kinship, friendship and/or market mechanisms, and how do these impact on decision-making and role (especially gender) distribution? Such information will help me uncover the character of the *local* moral economy in an unequal social setting. The effects of local relationships, be they kinship, friendship, neighbourhood or political ties, on the character and constitution of work relations are a potential source of contradiction (and maybe exploitation, e.g. Goddard 1996) and are therefore central to this research.

I will also reconstruct the initiatives' development, tracking the transformations undergone by the different actors, to explore how the local and regional contexts have shaped them and continue to do so. The aim here will be to investigate the evolving character of identities and social relationships that intersect at the points of the fairtrade and organic activities (e.g. Mottura & Mingione 1989). As the island's largest city and capital of the region, Palermo reflects and indeed magnifies the historical, economic and political complexity of Sicily and the south of Italy. This site is an extremely fascinating one to highlight the difficulties in enacting the ideas discussed, spelling out in full the current discrepancies of globalisation.

Methodology and relevant experience

From January 2003 until leaving for London in August 2004, I worked as a volunteer in one of the city's fairtrade shops. This not only gives me first-hand experience of how 'alternative' economic enterprises function, but also a good range of contacts with many of the people involved, willing to provide access for my research. There are two fairtrade outlets in Palermo that match the requirements of the research, both also selling organic fresh produce grown on local farms. Interestingly, one is located in a prosperous middle-class neighbourhood whereas the other is in a busy commercial street in the heart of the old city, normally associated with lower income consumers and residents. This setting gives the opportunity to produce a comparative perspective on differences of context relevant to the questions posed, and indeed contribute to refining these further. Nevertheless, in order to develop thorough insights, I will focus attention through participant observation on one outlet, to be determined from the outcome of the first stage of research. Participant observation will take the form of voluntary or part-time work.

To provide a full picture, I will base my research at the fairtrade shop and proceed to map its principal networks. I will select as special points of reference for in-depth analysis one of its neighbouring organic suppliers, and the local alternative trade organization (the ATO distributing fairtrade goods, currently a warehouse-office). My contacts have agreed to act as gatekeepers in this direction. I will take care to organize my schedule following the calendar of seasonal activities carried out by the actors (e.g. peaks of production or distribution for the organic farm, peaks in sales for the shop, etc.). Voluntary or part-time arrangements will provide the flexibility required. Fieldwork will take place over 12 months, from Oct 2006 to Oct 2007.

My previous experience and my knowledge of the setting will be crucial in carrying out data collection. Participant observation through work will be an integral part of the research. I will also use in-depth (qualitative) interviews to investigate the reasons and circumstances leading individuals to occupy their positions, as owners of an ATO or shop or farm, as workers, volunteers, customers. Data collected through these means will highlight the motives underpinning individual agency. So will the 'cultural productions' of the actors, in the form of dossiers, leaflets, press releases, adverts and other means of communication with the public; textual analysis will be used here.

Semi-structured interviews with key informants and participatory mapping with focus groups (both involving owners, customers, workers; separately if deemed necessary) will help assess the organizational features of the different enterprises and the way these are run: e.g. types of ownership and labour, role distribution, etc. Interviews and focus group will be used to understand the temporal trajectory of the initiatives and its long- and short-term significance. If deemed useful, those *previously* involved will be contacted where possible and interviews and oral histories used to provide further insights into the dynamics of the different actors.

I will build on my initial set of contacts to extend access, especially to those social networks that play an important role in constructing this new local moral economy. Methods will include 'snowballing' from the main ethnographic sites towards the external arenas they collaborate with, and back from groups already-known to be involved with fairtrade and organic farming towards the shop and farm, to elicit the different perspectives.

Trend analysis based on secondary (archival) data obtained from local and regional state bodies and sector organizations will be carried out. Reconstructing past and present economic tendencies will allow me to compare these with primary perceptions of the different contexts: local, regional, national and international. This will better situate qualitative data.

Academic background

During my MSc at UCL I studied issues of economic development, resource management and political economy, attending seminars held by Professor Daniel Miller. I addressed the environmental aspects of such topics (sustainable rural systems), including a course by Professor Paul Richards on the "Technology and Agrarian Development" group at Wageningen University, The Netherlands. I received training in anthropological and sociological research methods, both qualitative and quantitative (the MSc is an ESRC research-recognised degree). During my current MRes year at Goldsmiths I have attended courses on economic anthropology held by Dr Catherine Alexander. I also participated in the first of the ESRC-funded seminars 'Rethinking Economies' ('Unequal Development', held at Goldsmiths Anthropology Department), and will attend the remaining four, which are coordinated by my supervisor, Dr Alexander. I have taken courses in statistical analysis (with a specific focus on the use of SPSS), and I am continuing to develop the relevant regional and theoretical literature and the qualitative methods necessary for my project. I will also carry out a pilot study this summer in preparation for my MRes dissertation.

Ethics

Information involving the perceptions and value-judgements of employers and workers, or of those in different positions within hierarchical structures, and data on financial issues might prove of a sensitive nature. This project will therefore be carried out following the ASA *Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice 1999*. Particular attention will be paid to informed consent (section I, 4), honouring participants' trust and anticipating harms (I, 1-2), respecting rights to confidentiality and providing anonymity (I, 5), and lastly to obligations to employers (II, 2). I am especially keen to ensure that involvement with the 'host communities' should not end with the completion of fieldwork, following the ASA's ongoing recommendation on widening the scope of social research (V, 1). I believe my research is of relevance to all those engaged with understanding economic agency in late-capitalism, to address the challenges of an increasingly global, but *locally unequal*, 21st century world.

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