

Unpacking the Supermarket

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‘Globalisation is restructuring the ways in which we live, and in a very profound manner.’ (Giddens, 1999: 4)

Working in a supermarket, I often lose myself in the day-to-day routine of scanning products and checking prices. Beginning this module, I started to think about how my day job was affected by greater social structures. This critical reflection will examine the functioning of a supermarket, with an emphasis on globalisation, consumerism and ethical obligations.

As I start my Monday evening shift, I walk through the aisles noticing how long customers take to choose between products; this is a result of the process of ‘globalisation’. Globalisation has consequently provided an increased variety of choices to consumers. Globalisation is a cultural phenomenon, which Wilhelmina et al (2010 in Mak et al, 2012) suggests has influenced many aspects of human activity, including the



production and consumption of food. Conversely, some have criticised globalisation for increasing homogeneity and uniformity, stressing an importance on preserving one's uniqueness in an ever increasing globalised world (Sztompka, 1990, in Albrow and King, 1990). Similarly, Trubek (2008, in Mak et al, 2012) argues a loss of local gastronomic identity, whereby the connection between food and place becomes lost. However, Torres (2002, cited in Mak et al, 2012) argues that increasing globalisation could stimulate a greater demand for locally sourced products from cultural cuisines.

Giddens (1999) argues that the global market place is becoming increasingly developed, whereby the level of world trade is higher than ever before, involving a wider range of goods and services being readily available. This has therefore transformed the way in which goods and products are accessed, with an increase in sourcing products globally; thus, giving consumers more variety and choice in their day-to-day shop. Sourcing these products globally, irrespective of season or climate, allows consumers to access their favourite products at any given time; as well as allowing

them to pick and choose between their favourite aspects of different cultures.

This global sourcing of foods could be said to encourage a healthy lifestyle, with a wider variety of fruit and vegetables readily available to expand one's diet; however, as I scan these products I notice that they travel thousands of miles just to provide customers with more choice. With melons coming all the way from Asia, and strawberries from Spain, I begin to wonder if the environmental impact this global sourcing is causing is worth the extra choice to consumers. Environmentalists criticise the 'food miles' involved in transporting goods from around the globe to western consumers

(Barrientos and Dolan, 2006), and Asda have reported that within 20 years, 95% of their fresh produce will be at risk due to climate change (Idle, 2014). With most of these transportations occurring by air

travel, global sourcing is having a damaging effect on the environment; with a 2005 report stating that imports to the UK released 70,000 tonnes of CO2 omissions, which is equivalent to having 12,000 extra cars on the road (Elert, 2012). Not only does this impact the environment, it also attributes damaging effects on the public's health, seen from rising rates of asthma due to increased air pollution.

Supply and demand for products and services is ever increasing, especially within the food industry. I notice this at work due to the shelves always being re-stocked, a process Baudrillard (1998) refers to as 'abundance'. This concept of abundance refers to how consumer society is not just characterised by the abundance of goods and services, but by

the fact that within society everything is a service. From the smile I give at the checkout, to the automated 'thank you for shopping at Morrisons' handed out by the self-service checkout. Baudrillard (2008) argues that everything is now becoming a personal service. Abundance can also be seen within supermarkets in the way that shelves are always fully stocked; leading consumers to believe this is a global norm, while the reality is not how it appears. Data shows that if everyone were to consume the amount of an average American, we would need over four times more land the Earth has to live on, raising concerns on how over-consumption – particularly in

western societies – is stretching the Earth's resources to extremes (Elert, 2012).

Barrientos and Dolan (2006) report that some retailers consider how their corporate image

appears to their customers, and therefore appeal to them by taking responsibility for all aspects of their food; including the quality and hygiene of the food, along with the social and environmental impact of its production – something of which little is made aware to consumers. Marx (1859, in McLellan, 2000) refers to this as 'commodity fetishism', arguing that producers remain hidden from the consumer, thereby allowing individuals to distance themselves from the conditions workers are put in to produce these products. This allows customers to consume without considering the consequences of what they're buying, or who the profits are going to; which is evidenced by supermarkets only selling 4% of fair trade products (Yamoah et al, 2013).



In fields miles away in southern Spain, strawberry plantation workers are facing inhumane working conditions. Many of these workers are hired on seasonal contracts and flown over to work at these strawberry plantations from different countries, with no guarantee of a minimum wage. Plantation owners tend to hire more workers than necessary, but as contracts stipulate no end date. FIDH (2012) (The International Federation for Human Rights) report that many employers terminate these contracts before the end of the season – claiming a decline in production to justify this decision. This has been found to be highly detrimental to female seasonal workers, who when faced with the prospect of paying to return home have had to go into hiding, or become exploited either by their employers or through prostitution. Another issue reported by FIDH (2012) were the housing conditions faced by these workers, as employers agree to provide free housing to all contracted workers these conditions vary extensively between plantations. A main problem reported was a lack of privacy, as these houses often housed four to six people per room, and were segregated based upon sex and country of origin. Employers were also found to withhold a percentage of the workers' wages, in order to account for water and electricity – something which should readily be provided, as these housing conditions are legally considered to allow workers to 'live with dignity'. This begs the question whether supermarkets should be responsible, not just for the products that they are selling, but for how these products are getting to the shelves.

Another major ethical issue for supermarkets is the amount of food wasted. A report by WRAP (Waste and Resources Action Programme)

suggests that each year UK retailers produce 1.6 million tonnes of food waste, and this figure could be even higher as this was based upon data presented voluntarily by retailers (Stuart, 2009). Stuart (2009) also reports that a General Manager of a London based convenience store chain suggested that figures based upon self-reported data are not meaningful, because retailers will always understate their waste, as it helps them to improve their environmental credentials (ibid). Saner (2014) reports of three men being charged under the 1824 Vagrancy Act for taking food out of a supermarket bin, otherwise known as 'skipping'. In the UK, Stuart (2009) reports that we waste a third of the world's food supply, while one billion people go hungry, and it's an injustice to consider 'skipping' a crime, when the majority of people resorting to this are doing so because they cannot afford to buy quality food. But it's not just the supermarkets who are to blame for global food waste, according to a 2011 United

Nations study, the planet loses nearly a third of its food supply each year, and consumers in industrialised countries waste five times as much food as developing countries, which means in the U.S., 35 million tonnes of food each year head to incinerators and landfills (Peek, 2014). A

way to combat this food waste is to donate to companies such as FareShare and FoodCycle, who help to distribute edible food waste to tackle poverty.

The Trussell Trust is a leading UK Food Bank, who between the months of April and September helped more than 500,000 people with at least three days' worth of food and support; which is 38% more than the same



period last year (McAuley, 2014). These numbers continue to rise, even though there is a marked decrease in the number of new food banks opening. Tesco hold two neighbourhood food collections a year, from which they give a 30% top-up of all food donations; which they then donate to the Trussell Trust and FareShare to help combat food poverty within the UK. This winter alone Tesco helped provide 4.7 million meals to people in need, demonstrating how supermarkets can positively impact those in need with food that they would already be wasting (Tesco, 2014).

As I collect returns at the end of the night, I reflect upon how much of this food will be wasted, and how the homeless man who sits outside every night would be thankful for a bruised apple, or a half empty carton of milk; but instead he will go hungry. Howard and Sheth (1969) state that what we once saw as ordinary tasks in everyday life, can affect us in ways we are oblivious to.

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