

The Emergence and Decline of a Market

Category: the Case of Free-Labour Sugar

Andrew Smith, University of Liverpool Management School

adasmith@liverpool.ac.uk

Jennifer Johns, Management School, University of Bristol

Jennifer.johns@bristol.ac.uk

Abstract:

This article integrates uses a historical case study to integrate the theoretical work on category creation (Durand and Khaire, 2017) with the literature on CSR. While there is currently much interest in labour exploitation in global supply chains, often articulated through the Modern Slavery agenda, we suggest that there is merit in understanding historical cases of moral economies. The paper presents the case of the rise and fall of the market category of “labour-free sugar”, available to purchase by British consumers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This case illustrates several important points of contemporary relevance related to how we conceptualise the relationship between the producer and consumer as interrelated within moral economies, the importance of understanding that market categories can decline, and critique of the Whiggish idea of linear progress influences how many business-ethics researchers understand empirical subjects.

Keywords: slavery, sugar, Britain, history, moral economy, market categories.

Introduction

The growing interest among social activists and policymakers in slavery and other forms of unfree labour in the supply chains of multinational firms has recently produced a wave of research in management on the ethical issues related to slavery (Crane, 2013; New, 2015; LeBaron and Rühmkorf, 2017; Cousins et al., 2017; Stevenson and Cole, 2018). As late as 2003, a management academic could accurately state that modern slavery was an unexamined topic in management research (Cooke, 2003). The situation is now quite different due to rising scholarly interest in this topic (Crane, 2013). Academic research on business and present-day slavery has been stimulated by such policies as the UK's 2015 Modern Slavery Act, California's 2012 Transparency in Supply Chains Act and France's 2017 Corporate Duty of Vigilance Law. However, the issue of *historic* corporate responsibility, a concept developed by Schrempf-Stirling et al. (2016), is ignored by the new wave of management research on slavery. Our paper aims to remedy this important oversight. It does so by challenging the optimistic historical metanarrative that underpins most the extant research on consumer ethics. This metanarrative suggests that there is a tendency for each generation of consumers and businesspeople to be more ethical and more social aware than the generation that went before. Historical metanarratives are an important conceptual tool because they allow researchers to understand the present and to make predictive statements.

Our paper challenges this optimistic or “linear progressive” metanarrative by using the case study of the creation and disappearance of a particular market category, “free-labour sugar”, in nineteenth century Britain. Our paper is informed by both recent theoretical work on market categories (Durand & Khaire, 2017), the small but rapidly growing literature in

management on slavery (Cooke, 2003; Crane, 2013) and moral economies literature (Bolton and Laaser, 2013; Streeck, 2011; Sayer, 2016). Empirically, we show that substantial numbers of British consumers from the 1790s to the 1830s revealed through their purchasing consumer that they very concerned about the issue of overseas slavery. In the 1790s, a small group of entrepreneurs connected to the East India Company created a new market category, free-labour sugar, to appeal to anti-slavery consumers. From the 1790s to the 1830s, the UK sugar market was segmented into two morally significant categories, as retailers offered consumers the choice between slave and non-slave sugar. During this period, substantial numbers of British consumers paid a premium for sugar that was labelled as produced without slave labour. Subsequent generations of British consumers appear to have lost this moral awareness, for this market category ceased to exist. In the 1850s and 1860s, slave and non-slave sugar continued to arrive in British ports for eventual distribution to British consumers.

In this period, however, the consumer category called “free-labour sugar” no longer existed, which strongly suggests that British consumers had become indifferent to the more issues whether their sugar was produced by slaves or by free people. There was no differentiation between sugar and free labour sugar, which suggests that British people in this generation were less concerned about whether they were eating the products of slave labour than their parents and grandparents had been. This historical example of regression demonstrates the conditions under which new categories can emerge – and have a powerful impact – yet broader socio-economic and political changes can result in the category disappearing, taking focus on the moral issue with it.

This paper makes the following theoretical contributions. First, we show that the contemporary interest in labour exploitation and slavery is not new and that many generations ago consumers made moral judgements in their purchasing. This contributes to existing work on moral economies. Second, we build on the existing literature on market categories to show that changing ideas about morality can be important forces behind the creation of new market categories. Third we focus the attention of researchers on the phenomenon of the *disappearance* of market categories, a process that we document below but which has been hitherto ignored by researchers more interested in category creation. The issue of the longevity and sustainability of market categories is a central concern to the sustainability and human rights agendas. Fourth, we challenge the linear-progressive or Whiggish historical metanarrative that has hitherto informed much of the research on ethical consumption. The paper reviews existing literature on moral economies, market categories and historical narratives to construct a theoretical framework for analysis before outlining our research methodology and the ‘free-labour’ sugar case in Britain in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries. Discussion of the findings and reflection on the implications then follows.

Literature Review

Moral Economies

In order to examine the ethical dimensions of the historical ‘slave free’ sugar, this paper uses the moral economy framework to understand the interrelationship between production and consumption. Following Götz (2015), we define the term ‘moral economy’ to denote an alternative to the homo economicus model that understands that individuals can engage in utility maximisation via the creation of altruistic meanings for economic

transactions. Bolton and Laaser (2012: 511) argue that it has, despite recent neglect, a long and prestigious pedigree as an analytical framework (Mauss, 1967; Sayer, 2005; Scott, 1976; Thompson, 1991; Tönnies, 2001). We suggest that historically nurtured social values and norms are intermeshed with economic principles (Sayer, 2000; 2007). Therefore the moral economy and capitalism are not two separate spheres, but ‘dimensions of (...) the same practices (Sayer, 2000: 84). For Bolton and Laaser (2012: 508), the moral economy as a framework ‘gives voice to critical concerns for the workings of an increasingly disconnected capitalism, its inherent tendencies to treat labour as a ‘fictitious commodity’ and the impact this has on wider society’. Sayer (2016: 44) extends this by adding a spatial dimension, stating that ‘moral economy treats the economy not merely as a machine.....but as a complex set of relationships between people, and between people and nature, increasingly stretched around the world’.

The moral economy also enables production and consumption – traditionally separated – to be considered together, in the complexity of interrelationships highlighted by Sayer (2016). Consumption is inherently related to other economic processes and the rise of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and ETIs (Ethical Trading Initiatives) serves to illustrate the relationship between consumer purchasing (at the end of a commodity production chain) and production (at the start of the chain) (Hughes, 2006). However, for some, such as Hall (2011), ethical consumption has been reduce to a set of specific buying practices (devises such as Fairtrade, local and organic goods) that are thought to be emblematic of the ‘ethical consumer’ (Barnett et al, 2005; Guthman, 2004; Renting et al 2003). Hall (2011) argues that while ethical production processes are relatively well researched, ethical consumption practices remain comparatively under theorised. Aa a result,

everyday consumption choices are not well understood and are reduced to shopping habits and market projections rather than as an everyday practice or ‘ordinary’ consumption choice.

Thus we can understand that our contemporary understandings of moral economies is at best partial. In addition, the context in which moral economies occur is significant. Streeck (2011) argues that people who engage in economic practices draw consciously and unconsciously upon historically established customs, practices and their lay morality. This includes understandings of the norms and obligations of people who may resist economic practices that violate their sense of justice, fairness and morality (Bolton et al, 2012; Sanghera and Iliasov, 2008; Sayer, 2016; Streeck, 2008). These norms and obligations are, of course, context-specific and we will make discussion about the conditions that increase propensity to think ethically in relation to historical epoch and socio-economic context below.

Market Categories

While the moral economies framework conceptualises the underlying morality of consumption, every day consumption and its translation into products for purchase is less empirically realised. In the last two decades, a large body of research on market categories have developed Khaire and Wadhvani, 2010; Vergne, 2012; Kennedy and Fiss, 2013; Glynn and Navis, 2013; Alexy and George, 2013; Schultz et al. 2014; Vergne and Wry, 2014. Market categories are an important area of management research because human beings are cognitive misers who need the heuristic of market categories to make sense of the otherwise bewildering array of choices available to them. Market categories provide individuals with “a cognitive infrastructure” allows them to evaluation “organizations and their products.”

Categories are crucial because categorization informs the expectations of market participants and thus results in material changes in behaviour (Durand & Paoletta, 2013).

In their recent paper on category emergence, Durand and Khairi (2017) distinguish category emergence from category creation. In their framework, category emergence occurs when the market's existing classification system is ill-equipped to deal with material innovations. Examples of market categories that emerged include minivans, a vehicle class that was revolutionary when it appeared in the 1980s because it combined truck and car features (Rosa et al., 1999). Smartphones, which transcend the old categories of mobile phone, computer, and camera, are another example of a category that emerged due to a change in the material nature of products (Suarez et al., 2015). Satellite radio is another example of a market category that emerged because of technological change (Navis & Glynn, 2010). In contrast, category creation denotes the development of a new category via a process that involves creating a mental boundary around a subset of an existing category. Modern Indian Art, which art auction houses created as a subset of the category Modern Art, is an example of a created category (Khairi & Wadhvani, 2010). As this paragraph has shown, the existing literature helps us to understand the difference between category creation and category emergence.

Free-labour sugar, the category that is at the centre of our case study, was formed through a process that clearly corresponds to their definition of category creation, since it was formed in the 1790s by the creation of a subset of the existing category of sugar. Durand and Khairi (2017) suggest that category creation is typically accomplished by incumbent firms, while category emergence is more typically done by upstart firms. While this claim may be true in most cases, it is inconsistent with what we know about the creation of the category of

“free-labour sugar” in the 1790s, as the market category “free-labour sugar” appears to have been created by new entrants to the sugar trade rather than the existing sugar refining companies. As we show below, these new entrants were the East India Company and Quaker merchants who established sugar refineries in the UK designed to process Bengali sugar, which was marketed as morally superior to the “slave-grown sugar” from the Caribbean.

The existing theoretical literature on categories has important limitations that need to be identified here. First, while Durand and Khaire (2017) have done path-breaking and important work on category formation, scholars have not yet discussed the *disappearance* of market categories, a process that we document below. Navis et al. (2012) has discussed the phenomenon on the non-emergence of categories that one would logically expect to have emerged, but the literature to date has not discussed the phenomenon of established market categories ceasing to exist. Second, the role of evolving ideas about morality in the formation and disappearance of market categories has not yet been discussed by scholars of categories, who have instead focused most of their attention on market categories that have been formed as a result of technological changes. The lack of research on categories that are created as a result of changing ideas about morality is problematic because present-day markets include numerous products categories that are morally differentiated subsets of larger categories. For instance, “fair trade chocolate” is a subset of the market category of chocolate, along with “line-caught fish” and “cruelty-free cosmetics.” These market categories exist not because of any technological development but due to moral economies - a portion of the consumer population developed ethical concerns that translated into a willingness to pay a premium for goods within a subset of the existing market category.

Historical Metanarratives

A historical metanarrative is a grand story about the sweep of human history that allow us to make sense of data by constructing narratives that cover events in a particular time and place. Individuals use historical metanarratives to make sense of data related to particular cases and to construct meaningful historical narratives (Shucksmith et al., 2011). Narratives are themselves heuristic devices (Robinson and Hawpe, 1986). Historical metanarratives are thus powerful conceptual tools and can shape our thinking without our becoming conscious of it. They are sometimes associated with particular ideologies or worldviews. For instance, one well-known historical metanarrative is that provided by Marxism, which taught that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”. This metanarrative was used by individuals in particular contexts to make sense of their immediate environment.

Since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, one of the most pervasive historical metanarratives in Western culture has been a progressivist view of history that many call the Whig metanarrative. This metanarrative posits that each generation will be better off than its predecessors in material wealth, technological prowess, and, crucially, level of moral development. This progressive historical metanarratives came to dominate the thinking of Western individuals during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and have been hegemonic in Western cultures ever since then (Spadafore, 1990). In the present, the outstanding representatives of this tradition include Pinker (2017) and Singer (2011). Singer (2011), who is arguably the most influential living moral philosopher, regards the expansion of the “circle of ethical concern” that began during the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century as a sign of moral progress: people have always sought to act ethically towards their

kinfolk and neighbours, but the expression of concern for the welfare of distant individuals is a modern phenomenon, as is the term the “brotherhood of man.” Singer’s metanarrative allows him to link together a wide variety of phenomena ranging from the anti-slavery movement of the nineteenth century to modern animals rights campaigns in a single narrative arc. Singer’s influential “expanding circle” concept is a clear example of the Whiggish historical metanarrative discussed above.

Although he does not use identify specific causal mechanisms to account for its expansion, Singer suggests that the main force driving the growth of the circle of ethical concern is the growing influence of moral philosophers and their writings over the last few centuries. A somewhat more complex explanation for why human beings have become kinder and more ethical over time has been outlined by Pinker (2011, 2017), a psychologist who presents extensive quantitative data to show that human beings are becoming steadily more peaceful, cooperative, and, crucially “empathetic.” Pinker connects this “humanitarian revolution” to the steady rise in living standards and life expectancy and growing security from violence over the last few years. The causal mechanisms identified by Pinker as behind the progressive moral improvement of people include: the emergence of stable governments, democratization, the commercialization of societies and the growth of international trade as a percentage of GDP, the growing influence of eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophers.

Historical Metanarratives and Moral Economies

In the previous section, we discussed how two leading academics have published linear-progressivist theories that hold that the last few centuries have been characterized by growing levels of “empathy” and moral progress that had accompanied technological

progress and rising living standards. In this section of the paper, we show that this linear-progressivist historical narrative is also present in the literature on consumption ethics and moral economies, which is characterised a linear historical metanarrative that holds that there is a natural tendency for consumers to become more interested in ethical issues over time. As we show below, these authors appear to think about history in terms of a steady progression from a world in which economic actors that are indifferent to the impact of their decisions on distant strangers to one in which actors display concern for distant strangers by thinking about such issues as global warming, Fair Trade, and modern slavery in international supply chains. We refer to this rather optimistic metanarrative as the “Whiggish” view. The implication of this metanarrative is that one would expect each generation of consumers to be more humane, more ethically aware, and more likely to boycott unethical products than the generation that went before it.

As indicated above, marketing and business ethics academics have published extensively on various topics related to the *rise* of CSR (Bucic et al., 2012; Burke et al., 2014; Carfagna et al., 2014; Moraes, 2017). This phenomenon is generally regarded as a very recent development (Newholm et al., 2014), with most CSR academics’ narratives focusing on the period since 1990. Although this assumption has not been formally theorized, these authors suggest that attention to CSR intensifies as GDP per capita increases. This claim is consistent with the empirical data showing that demand for Fair-Trade and other “ethical” products that is largely confined to affluent consumers in developed economies (Bucic et al., 2012). The underlying causal mechanism envisioned by these scholars depicts CSR as a type of luxury good: once incomes climb beyond some multiple of bare subsistence, consumers’ definitions of utility will inevitably broaden to include ethical considerations, thereby prompting a change in firm strategy to include more expenditures on CSR activities. The

historical metanarrative that underpins in this research is a “linear progressive” or Whiggish one since it assumes that economic progress (rising per capita wealth) will inevitably translate into more CSR activities. This theory does not allow for regression in the level of CSR activity absent regression in the overall level of wealth in a society.

In an important paper that challenges this “linear progressive” metanarrative, Trentmann (2007) shows that the emergence of widespread concerns about global supply-chain ethics in the United Kingdom over the last two centuries has been a decidedly non-linear process marked by frequent periods of regression in which the level of interest in CSR displayed by firms and consumers fell even though living standards were steadily rising, albeit at a non-monotonic rate. Trentmann convincingly argues the periods of declining interest in CSR were not associated with the business cycle or negative economic shocks and were instead a function of cultural shifts. In effect, he shows that it is possible for a generation of consumers to be less concerned about a given ethical issue than the generation that went before it even though it is more affluent. This also gives cause to further interrogate Streeck’s (2011) observation regarding the historically established customs, practices and lay morality of people as it is possible for moral judgement to overcome historical customs and practices, or indeed become subsumed by them over time.

Towards a Non-Linear Historical Metanarrative

In an attempt to transcend Whiggish metanarrative, this paper draws on Trentmann (2007)’s insight that the emergence of widespread concerns about global supply-chain ethics has been a decidedly non-linear process. Trentmann’s research on the moral politics of food

in British history challenges the progressive narrative that suggests that over time consumers have become steadily more conscious of the ethical aspects of their food decisions. As we have shown above, this historical metanarrative is present in the influential writings of Peter Singer and in the work of business ethics scholars.

In Trentmann's schema, social reformers seek to moralise the consumption of a given commodity that previously had been regarded as morally unproblematic. This pattern is very much in evidence in our case study presented below. We will show that between 1750 and 1800, anti-slavery activists made the consumption of sugar an ethical question in British culture. Trentmann's research is important because it shows that a commodity that has been successfully moralised by reformers can subsequently become demoralised with the advent of a new generation of consumers who are indifferent to the ethical issues that once interested their predecessors. Here, Trentmann's thinking is informed by Thompson (1971), a study of moral economy in eighteenth-century England, which explored how a new ethos based on the legitimacy of amoral market forces displaced the older view that there was a morally correct price for bread. Trentmann's (2007) schema implies that present-day Fair Trade and Modern Slavery activists are attempting to *re-moralise* commodities that were once moralised and subsequently demoralised. His viewpoint suggests that the history of ethical consumption should be viewed in terms of cycles rather than a linear narrative towards progressively higher levels of ethical concern.

This paper argues that a non-linear approach is essential to understanding the moral economy of consumption, both in historic and contemporary cases. Indeed, only by examining historical cases can we observe the full cycle of the rise of market categorisations and their eventual decline, and to unpick the role of ethical consumption in *both* processes.

The paper will now discuss the methodology used to research this case study before presenting our findings and discussion.

Methodology and Data

The value of case-study research (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, Yin, 2003) for the testing and refinement of theory is now widely recognized by management researchers (Gibbert et al., 2008). The utility of business-historical methods to conduct case-study has been increasingly recognized by scholars in strategy, marketing, organization studies, and other fields of management. In the 1960s and 1970s, business-historical case study research was fundamental to management research, particularly in the field of strategy. While business-historical research methods later passed out of fashion, they are now experiencing a renaissance in management research (Smith and Umemura, 2017). This research presented in this paper was conducted using the business-historical research methods described by Kipping et al. (2014), Lipartito (2014), and Wadhvani and Decker (2017).

Within the community of scholars who use business-historical research methods, the *triangulation* of primary sources is generally regarded as an important principle in the design of research projects. In this context, the term triangulation involves examining documents created by different observers of the same event to obtain a synoptic view of the phenomena under investigation. The use of multiple data sets and collections of records improves the robustness of research findings. Business historians further increase the robustness of their findings by operationalizing source criticism and hermeneutics. Source criticism, an analytical tool first described in works on historical research methods in the late nineteenth century (Howell & Prevenier, 2001, 60-63; Langlois & Seignobos, 2014), involves asking a

sequence of questions about each document encountered by the researcher within an archival folder or other found data set. This battery of questions is designed to force the researcher to develop a clearer understanding of the precise motivations of the document's creator at the moment the document was composed. The standard research protocol in business history also require researchers to use hermeneutical research methods. Such methods are grounded "a theory of textual interpretation that posits that the meaning of language and texts arise through their relationship to" their context, which means that "specific texts, or parts of texts, therefore need to be understood in relationships to contexts and vice versa" (Kipping et al., 2014, 320). Hermeneutics thus requires the researcher to engage in extensive research about "the cultural, social, as well as temporal context" in which a given document was created.

Data Sources

Our data sources include documents that were created by a wide range of actors and which have a high degree of primary-ness. In recent years, large numbers of nineteenth-century British publications have been digitized and thus rendered keyword searchable. These publications include the *London Times*, which is keyword searchable back to 1785, the *Manchester Guardian*, and a range of other contemporary newspapers from large and small centres throughout the British Isles. We methodically searched these database for newspaper articles that dealt with the sugar trade, competition between free-labour and slave-produced sugar, and other issues related to our research project. Our searches of newspapers included advertisements as well as editorial content. We also searched the digitized transcripts of debates in the British parliament, which covers the period from 1803 onwards, and a database of parliamentary papers, which includes a range of government reports. Our keyword searches used the term "slave-grown sugar", a common nineteenth-century phrase, and other obvious search terms.

We found large numbers of relevant documents appeared in the 1840s and 1850s, when policymakers moved to eliminate the tariffs that had previously excluded slave-grown sugars from the British market. Other significant numbers of relevant documents date from 1862 and 1879, two years when a parliamentary committees engaged in an extensive research on the current UK's sugar trade. These investigations, which involved the study of sugar importing, refining, wholesaling, and retailing, included the taking of testimony from a significant number of business owners who appeared before a parliamentary committee to be cross-examined.

Our Case Study

Moralising trade and commodities

There is an extensive body of literature in history that suggests that people have, for many centuries, sought to behave ethically for centuries in trading with neighbours and kinsfolk. Indeed, there is research in the branch of anthropology informed by evolutionary psychology that suggests that all *Homo Sapiens* are genetically predisposed to behave ethically while trading with kin and people in their immediate group. However, the extant scholarly literature suggests that Western consumers did not start to think about the impact of their purchasing choices on invisible distant individuals until the Enlightenment (Todorov, 2009), that is until several generations after extra-European commodities such as tobacco, sugar, tea, chocolate, coffee, and porcelain, began to be consumed by households in Western Europe. Per capita sugar consumption rose dramatically in Britain in the seventeenth and

eighteenth centuries, but it was only with the rise of Abolitionist movement in the late eighteenth century that British consumers began to express ethical concerns about the Black slaves who produced the lion's share of the UK's sugar imports. Previously, decisions about whether or not to consume sugar lacked any moral dimension.

The rise of the anti-slavery movement in the late eighteenth century resulted in the moralisation of sugar as a commodity. The British anti-slavery movement is generally regarded to have been begun in the 1760s. The activists began the efforts to eliminate slavery by campaigning for the end of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, immediate freedom for any Black slaves who were present in mainland Britain, and the gradual abolition of slavery in Britain's colonies. After several decades of focusing their efforts on lobbying parliament to end slavery, these social activists adopted the strategy of complementing these efforts in the political realm with the use of consumer power to fight slavery. This marks an important shift in the moral fight against slavery, moving from a focus on explicitly political efforts to recognising the power of the economic, including everyday purchasing decisions.

Emergence and consolidation of a new market categorisation

Britain's first known boycott of slave-produced sugar took place in 1791. One credible estimate indicates that this campaign affected the behaviour of 400,000 consumers and the sales of slave-produced sugar fell, albeit only briefly, by between a third and a half. The boycott initially took the form of total abstention from sugar products by a small group of British consumers whose fervent opposition to slavery caused them to renounce the use of all products derived from sugar cane. From the 1790s into the early nineteenth century, there were scattered individuals who proclaimed that they no longer used any sweetener aside from honey, a product that was produced in Britain with free labour and which was thus relatively

expensive. Those who abstained from sugar, the so-called “anti-saccharites” included a disproportionate number of members of religious sects that also frowned on fashionable dress, music, and dancing (Midgley, 1996). Most British consumers were unwilling to go to this extreme to show their opposition to slavery, which created a market opportunity for the East India Company, the firm that had a statutory monopoly on trade with India, a country in which sugar cane was grown by peasants who were legally free, or at least not subject to chattel slavery. The East India Company, which was routinely described as having exploited the population of India, was arguably the most controversial and vilified firm in English-speaking world in this era. From 1788 to 1795, there was a high-profile effort in the British parliament to impeach an official of the East India Company for human rights abuses in Bengal (Bowen, 2005). The attacks from 1791 on West Indian sugar created an opportunity for the East India Company to both divert attention from its activities in India and to develop a profitable sideline to its existing commercial activities. We therefore observe that the initial impetus for the creation of this market category was not consumer pressure based on lay morality but the designs of a large corporation that sought to tap into existing ethical concerns and realise them in commercially profitable ways.

To promote the use of Bengali sugar within the British Isles, the East India Company partnered with James Cropper, a Quaker merchant in Liverpool whose opposition to slavery was consistent with the teachings of the religious sect of which he was a member. Historians have long debated whether Cropper’s attacks on the use of sugar-produced sugar from the West Indies were motivated primarily by his religious convictions or his pecuniary interest in promoting the sale of Bengali sugar (Williams, 1943). A historian who has recently examined Cropper’s life and work concluded that Cropper regarded his personal self-interest and God’s interest in freeing the slaves as entirely congruent (Davis, 1988). Another entrepreneur who

helped to develop the market category of “free-grown sugar” was the ceramics producer Josiah Wedgwood, who produced decorative special bowls for free-labour sugar, which allowed households to inform visitors that they had behaved ethically by refusing to buy cheaper, slave-labour sugar (see Figure 1; Guerty and Switaj, 2004). As in the case of James Cropper, Wedgwood regarded his material interest and the moral cause of freeing the slaves as entirely congruent (Oldfield, 2012). Since sugar in this period was not sold in branded packaging and was, in any case, offered to visitors in ceramic dishes, Wedgwood’s sugar dishes played an important role in the development of the market category, since they allowed households to signal their ethical purchasing behaviour in a non-verbal fashion.

Figure 1: Sugar bowl inscribed 'East India Sugar. The produce of Free Labour'.
International Slavery Museum, Liverpool, Accession number MMM.1994.111



Sales of sugar from India increased tenfold in a two-year period, an impressive increase that was likely due, at least in part, to the pamphlet campaign against Caribbean sugar and the widespread belief that sugar production in India used free labour. Up until the end of slavery in the British Empire in 1834, British consumers were implored to avoid buying slave-labour sugar. For instance, William Naish's 1828 pamphlet *Reasons for Using East India Sugar* contained vivid descriptions of the atrocities committed on the sugar plantations of the British West Indies (Naish, 1828). Shops installed signs boasting that their sugar was produced by free labour, although the absence of regulations to ensure truthful labelling meant that some slave-labour sugar was likely sold as free-labour sugar (Midgley, 1996; Holcomb, 2014; Conrad, 2018). Grocers in provincial English towns appear to have used simple, easy to remember statistics of dubious accuracy to persuade customers to purchase more expensive free-grown sugar from India: "by six families using East India sugar instead of West India sugar one slave less is required" (Stobart, 2012. p.46)

Market Category Disappearance

The end of slavery in the British Empire in 1834 was followed by approximately a decade in which British consumers were not called upon to make an ethical choice between the free-labour and slave-labour sugar market categories, since protective tariffs effectively excluded slave sugar from the British market. Between 1834 and 1846, the British government imposed differential duties to allow British colonial producers to compete in the British market with sugar from countries that still had slavery, such as the United States, Cuba, and Brazil. This arrangement, which effectively forced British sugar consumers to shop in what Abolitionists regarded as an ethical fashion, unravelled after June 1846 when a Liberal government came into office. The Liberal government controversially decided to equalize the duties on British colonial and foreign (i.e., slave-grown) sugar

(Green, 1991, 232; Schuyler, 1918, 72). Thereafter, slave-produced sugar reappeared in British shops, where it competed with free-labour sugar. In the 1850s, British imports of cheaper slave-produced sugar surged.

The changes in the sugar tariff made in 1846 were opposed, unsuccessfully, by an alliance of British West Indian absentee plantation owners, who complained that they would be unable to compete with foreign slave-produced sugar, and a faction within the anti-slavery movement that feared the humanitarian consequences of allowing slave-produced sugar to drive colonial sugar out of the British market. They likened competition between slave and free-labour sugar to competition between a racehorse and a steam locomotive (Huzzey, 2010). After the abolition of the customs duties, slave sugar's share of the British market increased dramatically. In the period 1853-1862, imports of sugar from the British West Indies, where slavery had ended, increased just 16.7%, whereas imports from foreign slave territories such as Cuba and Puerto Rico increased 384.2% (See Curtin, 1954, Table 1). British policymakers who supported the policy of not discriminating between slave and free labour expressed confidence that goods produced with free labour would eventually be able to outcompete goods produced by slaves (Baring, 1857) but the precise opposite occurred.

A parliamentary committee investigated the British sugar trade in 1862 and produced a richly detailed report that offers us a snapshot into how the sugar trade operated in that year. The report describes how grocers offered consumers a wide variety of sugar products differentiated by colour, texture, and degree of saccharine content. Many market categories within the broad category of "sugar" thus existed. However, there was no evidence that retailers, even the so-called "west-end grocers" who served the affluent, sold sugar products that were categorized by whether they were produced with free as opposed to slave labour.

The detailed report by the parliamentary committee indicates that the market category of “free-labour sugar” no longer existed. None of the wholesalers who testified before the committee suggested that anti-slavery or other ethical considerations influenced the buying preferences to either retailers or consumers (Travers, 1862, 18).¹ In the 1820s, some British shops has signs boasting that their sugar had been produced with free labour. By the 1850s and 1860s, such signs has disappeared. There were many market categories of sugar, but none of these market categories as differentiated by any moral dimension.

The apparent indifference of British consumers to the ethical issues related to sugar consumption is striking given that the 1862 parliamentary committee was concerned that a proposed change in the manner in which customs duties were levied on different grades of sugar might further disadvantage free-labour producers of sugar by accidentally conferring benefits on “the slave-grown sugars” from “Cuba and elsewhere” (Davis, 1862, 172)²

This displacement of free-labour sugar from the British colonies with sugar from Cuba, Brazil, and other jurisdictions that retained slavery resulted in severe economic reversals for sugar producers in Jamaica and other British possessions. In the 1850s, these producers repeatedly called for the re-introduction of some form of protection for sugar producers who were required to pay their workforces. The British government continuously denied such requests for protection against “slave-grown sugar” whenever the issue was raised in parliament. The last time a proposal to use tariff policy to discriminate in favour of free-labour sugar was debated in parliament was in 1864, when politicians debated a petition from the inhabitants of Kingston Jamaica that had requested that the British government

¹ Testimony by Archibald Travers, 8 May 1862, *Report from the Select Committee on the Sugar Duties; together with the proceedings of the committee, minutes of evidence, appendix, and index.* p. 18

² See testimony of John Davis, Chairman of the Committee of London Refiners, 2 June 1862, in *Ibid*, p. 172

introduce duties on “slave-grown sugar” from Cuba that would give Jamaica and other British colonial sugars a fighting chance in the British market (Brougham, 1864). Once again, the British government rejected the proposal.

After 1864, there was no further discussion in the British parliament about discriminatory duties or other measures that would discourage the consumption of slave-grown sugar in the British market. A variety of sources indicate that considerable quantities of slave-produced sugar continued to be consumed in Britain until the late 1880s, when the remaining slave-labour countries in the Western hemisphere, Brazil and Cuba, ended the institution of slavery. Cuba’s exports of sugar to Britain increased steadily in the two decades after 1850. In 1879, when parliament launched another investigation of the international sugar trade, Thomas Daniel Hill, who represented British residents who owned sugar-producing estates in the British West Indies, attributed the economic travails of Jamaica to the fact it could not compete against “slave-grown sugar” in the British market (Hill, 1879, 121). In 1879, a politician named Courtney noted that the proportion of Britain’s sugar sourced from outside the Empire had increased steadily since 1861, with Cuba being Britain’s main source of “slave-grown sugar.” Courtney predicted that the importance of Cuba as a source of sugar would likely decrease now that slavery was “gradually” being phased out in that country (Courtney, 1879, 181).

Analysis and Implications

The historical material presented above suggests that the history of ethical consumption should be viewed in terms of cycles rather than a linear narrative towards progressively higher levels of ethical concern. The evidence shows that between 1750 and

1800, anti-slavery activists made the consumption of sugar an ethical question in British culture. They successfully moralized the commodity. Prior to 1750, there is no evidence of any British consumer perceiving any moral problems with using slave produced sugar. By 1800, a growing number of British sugar buyers were insisting that all of the sugar served in their households had to be slavery-free. After the 1840s, however, this commodity became demoralized again: British people continued to oppose slavery in the abstract, and to support efforts by the British state to suppress slavery overseas, but this widespread opposition to slavery did not affect British consumer behaviour. The fact that the market category of “free-labour sugar” did not re-appear suggests that few if any consumers perceived any problems with consuming sugar produced by slaves, even though sources of free-labour sugar were available. This is also despite the fact that GDP per capita had risen during this time – the average person in 1890 was considerably better off than they had been in 1790 yet we do not see an associated increase in morality with regard to sugar consumption.

Cycles in the moral economies of slavery perpetuated following the disappearance of the slave-free sugar and anti-slavery sentiment remained strong in Britain in the generation after the abolition of slavery within the British Empire. For instance, there was widespread support for the role of British diplomats and warships in attempting to suppress the trans-Atlantic, Arab, and intra-African slave trades (Huzzey, 2012; Peterson, 2010). The desire to prevent the re-emergence of quasi-slavery led to progressively tighter regulation of the contract labour systems that brought Chinese and South Asian workers to Britain’s New World colonies (Sturman, 2014).

In short, anti-slavery sentiment had become entrenched in British *political culture* by the 1830s and remained for the rest of the nineteenth century. However, opposition to slavery

does not appear to have translated into British *consumer culture* in the period after 1834. In the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s, few British consumers had a problem with wearing or consuming the products of slave labour. The morality of commodities produced using slave labour did not impact on everyday consumption practices. One illustrative example is that of the so-called Free Cotton movement, a short-lived campaign in the 1830s in which very few British consumers participated. This campaign did not result in a new market categorisation as British consumers did not respond to this ethical campaign as they did slave-free sugar. Reiniger (2013) shows how attempts to set up a Free-Cotton store in the affluent English town of Bath failed because the free-labour textiles on offer did not appeal to fashion-conscious locals. This apparent indifference on the part of British consumers to whether their sugar had been produced by slaves continued into the 1870s and 1880s. No signs of the re-emergence of the market category of “free-labour sugar” can be found in newspapers or other primary sources from that period. Slave-produced sugar continued to be consumed in the British Isles until the late 1880s, when the abolition of slavery in Cuba and Brazil meant that for the first time since 1846, slave-grown sugar disappeared from the British market.

The disappearance of the market category of “free-labour sugar” provides an interesting and illuminating example of the temporal vulnerabilities of market categories, and the consumer decisions underpinning them. Our research has implications for today’s Ethical Trade activists and others involved in movements related to global supply-chain ethics which are attempting to moralise commodities and practices by raising awareness of issues such as Modern Slavery. Our study of the rise and fall of the market category of free-labour sugar strongly indicates that it is possible for consumers’ level of interest in a particular moral issue to recede over time. Our finding that regression is possible is a warning against a false sense of complacency. Campaigners, and those who support them, should take note that while firms

may be willing to devote resources to anti-slavery and other CSR activities in particular socio-political contexts, a change in the wider context, such as shift in the overall political climate towards the right, can cause result in fewer societal resources being devoted to such activities. The complex interrelationship between political, economic and social factors in the construction and maintenance of moral economies creates dynamism and inevitable change.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a historical case that illustrates much of contemporary relevance. The context of the anti-slavery movement in Britain (and elsewhere) during the 18th and 19th Centuries has some clear parallels - and some distinct differences – with current Modern Slavery rhetoric, legislation and ethical campaigning. We offer four theoretical contributions that can serve to strengthen existing analyses of contemporary Modern Slavery and ethical trading initiatives. First, the paper argues that contemporary interest in labour exploitation and slavery is not new and that many generations ago consumers made moral judgements in their purchasing. The complex interplay of politics and economics in the construction of moral economies are enduring and we can observe repetition in the patterns of ethical decision making (and retreat from ethical purchasing of specific commodities). Following Sayer's (2016: 44) conceptualisation of the moral economy as 'a complex set of relationships between people, and between people and nature, increasingly stretched around the world', we can also observe that the distanced relationship between producer and consumer (in the free labour sugar case in India and Britain respectively) has stretched across substantial geographical distances for quite a number of centuries and has not necessarily been a barrier to ethical purchasing by consumers. We therefore contribute to existing literature on the moral economy through evidencing the need to consider *both* production and

consumption and the everyday purchasing decisions – often by housewives – that underpin moral economies.

Second, the paper provides an historical example of the *creation* of a market categorisation and offers uniquely positions market categorisation formation within historical context and moral economies. The formation of the category of free-labour sugar was not initially driven by consumers, it was constructed by the East India Company to fulfil several political and commercial ambitions. However, it did tap into existing moral debates around slavery and the ordinary British housewife was able to use agency to make a moral decision. Had these ethical concerns not been present, or in sufficient volume, the campaign would have failed as did so many other attempts at commodity-based market categorisations during this period.

Third, this paper has documented a case of the *disappearance* of market categories, a process that we document below but which has been hitherto ignored by researchers more interested in category creation. The ‘free-labour’ sugar case shows that changing ideas about morality can be important forces behind the creation of new market categories and then the disappearance of a morally-differentiated market category, in this case “free-labour sugar”. We therefore suggest that the theoretical frameworks that researchers use to understand the emergence and creation of market categories be refined so as to include a moral dimension.

Fourth, the literature review at the start of this paper demonstrated that the Whiggish idea of linear progress influences how many business-ethics researchers understand empirical subjects. In our literature review, we showed how much of the literature on the rise of the ethical consumer is informed by the notion that each generation is more ethical and more

willing to spend resources on buying ethical products. Our paper, which documents a case of regression, shows that it is entirely possible for consumers' level of interest in a particular moral issue, in this case the desire not to consume the products of slave labour, to decline as well as to rise with the passage of time. Our case study is thus inconsistent with the moral progress metanarrative that is present in much management research and which is pervasive in the wider culture of the Western world. By challenging the linear-progressive or Whiggish historical metanarrative that has hitherto informed much of the academic research on ethical consumption, this paper should encourage management researchers to reflect on whether their interpretations of social phenomena are influenced by historical metanarratives that deserve greater scrutiny than they have hitherto been given.

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