

Hope, Accountability, and Backlash: Fair Trade and the Technologies of Responsibility in Global Supply Chains

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Fair trade can be understood not simply as a market mechanism or ethical label, but as part of a broader political struggle over how responsibility in global supply chains is defined, institutionalised, and contested. This keynote proposes to analyse these dynamics through three ideal-typical “technologies of responsibility.” First, certification operates as a technology of hope: private standards and labels institutionalise moral expectations and enable action under conditions of uncertainty, while striving to produce fairer outcomes they cannot fully guarantee. Second, due diligence regulation and supply-chain law function as technologies of accountability, transforming responsibility into legal and procedural obligations that remain politically contested. Third, current crises and regulatory backlash reveal technologies of (de-)politicisation, in which responsibility does not disappear but is renegotiated, limited, and reprioritised under economic and political pressure. Drawing on research on fair trade, supply-chain governance, and public attitudes toward environmental and justice claims, the keynote argues that responsibility in global capitalism remains a contested political project rather than a settled institutional solution.