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## Freedom and Control

### *Analysing the Values of Niche Business Owners in Aarhus, Denmark*

ANNE-ERITA G. BERTA

The good life is the life you have chosen for yourself.

—Ole, owner of a bakery

### Introduction

Focusing on three niche businesses in Aarhus, Denmark, in this chapter I show that what their owners have in common is a search for the good life, involving being recognized as good in the eyes of others via maintaining a balance between ethics and profit, as well as maintaining a work<sup>1</sup> something exemplified by the quote from Ole above. These business owners operate in a ‘moral economy’ in which they find themselves in relations of mutual dependence with their customers when it comes to fulfilling their desire for the good life.

For example, in the bakery they owned, Marie and Ole’s business bore witness to their dedication to this idea that the good life is woven into the virtue of being good, a topic recently revisited by Chris Gregory and Jon Altman in their edited volume *The Quest for the Good Life in Precarious Times* (2018). Their values point towards a moral economy in which the values of justice (just price), local production (preference for the local) and (more than) fair working conditions for employees are central.

All businesses depend on customers to make profits. However, in the mainstream market economy, customers can find the same products in different shops and are not limited to what a specific shop has. Niche firms, on the other hand, offer something special and often unique that cannot easily be found elsewhere. The special product can take the form of a specific

commodity, a form of expertise or a service. In this chapter, I argue that the business owners in my sample,<sup>2</sup> as representing niche economies, seek the good life by doing something they enjoy and find meaningful. I will show that social recognition and self-fulfilment are important but only as long as owners are free to control the balance between good ethics and making a profit. These business owners act within a moral economy consisting of mutual moral obligations to their customers.

Several scholars have highlighted the social aspects of economic life. Karl Polanyi (2001 [1944]: 48) argued that non-economic motivations are always primary in the economy (*ibid.*) and that social acceptance and recognition are higher goods than material values. Similar claims have been made and exemplified in discourses on the economy, morality and ethics. For example, Chris Gregory states that, '[w]hile the quest for money is part and parcel of the quest for the good life, it by no means defines it' (Gregory 2018: 8). Human sociality is also central to theories of the gift economy and exchange theory (Mauss 1966; Bloch and Parry 1989), as well as political economy (Thompson 2010 [1971]; Scott 1976) and discourses on economy and ethics (Abend 2014).

E.P. Thompson (2010 [1971]) argued that solidarity among eighteenth-century British working-class communities was achieved through their members' support for, and belief in, a set of shared values, norms and obligations regarding livelihood. His idea was that when the market is just, everyone benefits. However, Thompson's notion of a moral economy has been criticized for being too specific, just as others have been considered too general (see Hann 2018 on Fassin).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the relatively recent interest in ethics in the business sector reflects similar aspirations to stress the social in economic action. Gabriel Abend (2014) shows how a concern for business ethics generates both social and economic profits. In a similar vein, James Carrier (2018) argues that the spheres of morality, the economy, sociality and politics should not and cannot be viewed separately, as they are all embedded in each other, making it impossible to tell where one starts and another ends. As a solution, he suggests (2018: 18) that a distinction be made between the moral values that form the context of economic activities and those that are derived from them, thus understanding moral economy as 'the mutual moral obligations that arise when people transact with each other over the course of time'.

The business owners we meet later in this chapter operate within a moral economic framework in which they feel obliged to act in a certain economic way in order to fulfil the moral expectations of other individuals.<sup>4</sup> The firms and business owners in the niche economies I have examined organize their work and production within historically rooted and mutually developed relations that resonate with 'moral economy' in the senses

discussed by Hann (2018) and Carrier (2018), as well as Thompson (2010 [1971]). ‘Moral economy’ is visible in the way Julian the goldsmith will only make jewellery of a specific quality and uniqueness, differentiating what he produces from the output of mass-producing firms. The moral economy at work here is an economy in which merchant and consumer are mutually dependent. Customers need niche businesses to fulfil their desires for unique and specialized items, while the business owners are dependent on their customers in order to live good lives with the freedom to control their own firms. Moreover, the business owners stress their ethical profile through, for example, the specific origins of their supply (organic, locally produced), prices, fair working conditions for their employees or ethical trade. This ethical profile may be understood as rooted in the moral economy of the niche economy, where niche business owners share a concern for quality and local production as well as an obligation towards their customers.

In conversation with Sally, another of my business owners, she argued that when dealing with the economy and the place of money it was important to know what is ‘right’:

You know, there are two types of money. There’s the money that has blood and human lives on it, and there’s moral money [*moralske penge*]. [As a business owner] I constantly have to evaluate what is morally and ethically right, but luckily for me, I *know* what is right. (Excerpt from conversation with Sally, my translation)

However, I also argue that the business owners’ primary motive is to achieve freedom for themselves. In their search for a life of freedom, niche business owners must show that they belong to a ‘moral economy’ by promoting values concerning quality and expertise and by having a mutual relationship with their customers.

## Background

On the tip of east-central Jutland lies Denmark’s second largest city, Aarhus, a small city by European standards, with only 300,000 inhabitants. However, it is significant in economic terms, as it accommodates some of Denmark’s largest businesses, such as the world’s largest wind turbine producer, Vestas, and Scandinavia’s largest exporter of dairy products, Arla. Aarhus has a profile as a rapidly growing business centre. The kind of growth we see in Aarhus, like Denmark as a whole, is marked by financial institutions and a number of stock-based corporations. After the First World War and various financial crises, the Danish state regulated

the market by placing strict regulations on imports, exports and labour (Storli 2011). Now oligopolies dominate a growing number of sectors, a development that has been encouraged through government regulations to improve the competitiveness of the economy. This type of market came with neoliberal principles of open, free competition that gradually evolved after the Second World War, after Denmark joined the European Union in 1972, and continued throughout the 1980s.

The period after the Second World War was characterized by the development of a universal welfare state based on the idea of equality (*lighed*) and that each citizen should benefit society by being active in the labour market and paying taxes to the state (Bejder and Kristensen 2016). Since then, the state has allowed more and more private providers to compete by offering private services in spheres that were originally considered public, such as health, education and public administration. The private sector was given the freedom to grow in what was gradually becoming a more liberal market state. Following the global financial crisis in 2007–2008, the Danish government introduced a security package to protect large corporations from bankruptcy and thus make them invulnerable to financial crises (Lundkvist 2009; Pedersen 2011). This state-supported development has made it difficult for small enterprises to compete without the state protecting their security. However, some small niche businesses have continued to thrive without growing beyond a certain size.

In this chapter, I explore the values and motivations of the owners of a bakery, a goldsmith's and a toyshop. Though not having much capital, they were resilient. The goldsmith produced to order and self-identified as a creative artist. The bakery owners displayed some of the characteristics of artists and craftpersons in producing hand-made and therefore unique goods, or developing 'a name' or brand.

The three firms in my sample were each owned by one to three individuals who were related either by descent or marriage, and they were all of north European descent. They belonged to the category that Danish national statistics refer to as small businesses (*små virksomheder*) or micro-businesses (*mikrovirksomheder*), meaning that they had between 10–49 or 0–9 annual full-time employees respectively (Jensen et al. 2016). According to the EU Commission Recommendation of 6 May 2003 Concerning the Definition of Micro, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises, small businesses have a maximum yearly income of €50 million: these firms were all micro-enterprises with yearly revenues of between €80,000 and €660,000. They were also small in the sense that their initial capital outlay amounted to DKK 50,000 (approximately €6,690) or less. Furthermore, the firms were all independent (*uafhængig*), meaning that they did not belong to a corporate group.

The shops all represent different niches in commodity production and retail sale, and those who were commodity producers were also distributors. For instance, the bakery specialized in the production of a unique, organic, local, vegetarian, home-made sourdough bread with a limited selection and a pastry-only principle, meaning that it did not offer coffee or other beverages. All businesses were located within the city centre, and all owners were involved in, and controlled, all areas of their businesses, from production and finance to distribution and incidental work. Most businesses were profitable, but all had mortgages or loans to pay off. The owners, who were between 27 and 58 years old, earned a low to average Danish salary (approximately €42,840 in 2017 ('Gennemsnitsdanskeren' 2018)) and had different mortgages on their private homes and cars. None of them owned secondary homes, and while some took salaries, others took profits.

## Being Good: The Virtues of a Well-Lived Life

In the following, I introduce three different business owners and discuss their perceptions of the good life and their virtues and values.

### *Sally, the Toy Shop Owner: 'I Only Sell Good Products, not Cheap Plastic'*

Sally, a woman in her fifties, was the second-generation owner of a toy shop. She lived in an apartment she rented from her mother, the previous owner and founder of the business. When Sally's mother started the business 45 years ago, she sold mainly yarn and cloth nappies. Although Sally still offered both, her main merchandise was toys, due to a change in customer demand. When Sally's mother was managing the business, she outsourced the production to other small firms; the yarn and raw materials were sourced from a local Danish firm and then the clothes were sewn by a local, Aarhus-based tailor. Four years ago, Sally's mother's main wholesale customer ended their arrangement and expanded with their own shops across the nation. The business sustained great losses and came close to bankruptcy; it was then that Sally was invited to manage the shop. When, after the first few years, Sally had more than quadrupled their revenue, her mother gave her full responsibility for the firm and started the process of a formal change of ownership. Sally's success has continued to grow, and when I met her for the first time, her shop was widely known in the city and beyond for hand-made children's clothes and ethical, pedagogical (*pæda-*

*gogiske*), ‘poison-free’ toys, following her mother’s principles of local, clean and ethical production.

Sally and her mother felt that their products should be produced as close as possible to where they were being sold. For the yarn and fabric, that meant within Denmark and Aarhus; many of the toy suppliers were Danish too, but some were German or sourced from other European countries. Clean production, moreover, meant production using minimal amounts of harmful chemicals or none at all.

The idea of ethical production was also linked to employment conditions. Sally expected her toys to be produced under fair conditions, with insurance for workers, fair salaries and other basic rights granted and implemented by the EU and the Danish state. The children’s clothes were designed by Sally and her mother and then sewn by a local tailor, who worked from home. Although the demand for them was greater than one tailor could meet, Sally did not want to expand production, partly because it had proven difficult for her to find additional tailors she considered talented enough, but she ultimately felt quality control would prove harder to monitor with increased production. The tailor was delivering the finished garments every other week, and Sally would closely inspect each piece before passing it for sale in her shop.

Sally talked dismissively about what she referred to as ‘cheap plastic’ – that is, poor-quality plastic consumer goods sold at a low price. Her products were made to last, and she could place herself and her products in an ethically superior position. She had weekly contact with all her suppliers and always reflected on her own values whenever she considered accepting new products or offers from new suppliers. She also claimed that she did not make a profit from the yarn, which she sold at cost price. This was a charity, she claimed, to encourage the ‘joy of knitting’. The choices Sally made for her business indeed made her ‘good’ in the eyes of her customers.

The concern for ethical consumption, either by choosing goods that are produced under fair working conditions, with a concern for the environment, or by minimizing shopping, is an increasing trend in Europe and North America, where so-called ethical goods are increasingly popular (Carrier 2012). Sally constantly used a rhetoric that attributed negative associations to ‘the others’ – that is, corporate chains. Whereas these ‘other’ businesses sold ‘cheap plastic’ that ‘did not last’, she and her firm were different. She used the same rhetoric about the managers and employers of such businesses, whom she often spoke about as being motivated by money and power. By placing herself in opposition to these ‘other’ firms, Sally was seeking approval. She valued the small, durable and local over the

large, foreign and of poor quality. She belonged to a niche economy where it was more important to offer something ethical, special and unique than maximize profits.

Sally had won recognition as an ethically 'good' business owner through regular reports in national and local newspapers. On moral grounds, she had been part of the yearly criticism of 'Black Friday' in denouncing the adoption of what she referred to as a 'destructive American shopping spree' on the last Friday in November. Sally had taken a stand in public debates as a clear voice against consumerism and the culture of 'buy and throw'. She presented herself as a business owner who offered an alternative to mass consumer culture, despite having to act within what is clearly a consumer society. She was known on social media such as Facebook and Instagram and through word of mouth among the inhabitants of Aarhus and beyond. She received good reports from customers travelling from other towns and cities especially to visit her shop, and some online customers had called, emailed and wrote notes and letters expressing their appreciation of her 'unique' business and personality. Fellow shop owners within different niches had also passed on reports of their own customers having expressed enthusiasm for Sally and her shop.

The recognition Sally received validated her business as ethically good and gave her encouragement to keep going. In making people feel ethically good about themselves, shopping in a place that eschewed negativity in respect of social justice, pollution and the environment, her business was a success.

I looked at 103 reviews of Sally's business (including eighteen from customers I interviewed), and 100% gave her five out of five stars.<sup>5</sup> The reviews confirmed the notion that Sally had created a space where people could shop with a good conscience, a common feature of all the firms I studied.

Sally would not admit that she was interested in profit, but regardless of her inner motivation, her business was profitable. Like the other business owners in my sample, she was unwilling to expand her firm, arguing that her business was only successful because *she* was controlling it. If she expanded, she would have to let some of this control go to someone else, and that was not an option for her. However, the control she demanded did not provide her with the freedom to take a day off or close the shop whenever she felt like it. She was constantly concerned with making a profit without compromising any of her ethical principles. By insisting on not expanding her business, she ensured she had the control and freedom to run the business in her own interests. The social recognition she received from her customers and her reputation as a renowned business in the city were undoubtedly an important motivation in maintaining her business. The self-fulfilment she acquired from successfully managing a specialized,

unique and ethical firm proved significant for why she refused to release her control over any area of the firm.

*Marie and Ole, the Bakers: 'Coming Here Is the Highlight of Their Day'*

How can a simple statement like the above be evidence of a wish to do good? Ole, a bakery owner, was, like Sally, concerned with being a good person. Ole and Marie had previously owned and built up an organic mushroom farm over many years. Before that, they had both pursued academic careers. After having children, they discovered that their careers were more time-consuming than they wanted. Their academic jobs had been well paid, and they had managed to save enough money to eventually buy, after three years of research, a farm and build up their mushroom production. Their children were involved in the work on the farm, and they could adjust their work hours to those parts of the day when their children were at school, in the kindergarten or asleep.

When their children moved away from home to study, however, they felt lonely on the large farm. Over the years, their desire to see other people and have daily, direct contact with their customers grew. They told me that they wanted to see the direct results of their work in the appreciation shown by customers. When they sold mushrooms to restaurants and grocery shops, they did not get to experience direct feedback and appreciation from the customers, something they missed and longed for. When they finally decided to sell the farm, they were left with a significant profit and bought a town house in downtown Aarhus. They could afford to spend a year researching and experimenting with new ideas before they decided what they could do that was new. When they settled on the idea of starting a bakery, they stated that this was because it would give them the opportunity to satisfy their wish to work in a social environment where they had direct contact with their customers. They therefore leased a fifty-square metre business premises and spent the rest of the money from selling the farm in turning it into a tiny bakery.

Their plan was to sell a small variety of home-made, organic breads made from local ingredients. They wanted to offer products at prices that allowed young students and single parents – not just middle-class businessmen – to buy their bread. Their prices were therefore lower than comparable bakeries. They were able to offer lower prices for several reasons. First, they were able to start their business with some capital. Secondly, with no mortgage and all their children having moved out, and with no interest in having much leisure time or in spending money, they were happy with just a small salary to cover their costs. They planned to work with just the

two of them in the bakery, baking and selling the goods directly over the counter. However, their business quickly became an attraction, and only a few months after opening they had to hire some help. When I met Ole and Marie, they had nine employees (some part-time) and themselves worked six days a week from 3:00 AM to 6:00 PM, closing for just one day. Marie and Ole did all the bread-baking themselves. The employees, who were there to serve the customers, worked either a full day of eight hours or shorter shifts for students and part-time employees.

When Ole stated that coming to the bakery was the highlight of the day for their customers, he clearly believed he had succeeded in his aim of running a bakery that offered something good to its customers. Ole had specific ideas about what 'good' meant in this context, such as pleasant conversations and the feeling of being included, welcomed and part of a community.

In contrast to Sally, Ole did not make comparisons between himself and big business owners so often. Instead, he frequently referred to himself as someone who valued modesty. For instance, he mentioned that he and his wife did not have any interest in spending money: it was not something they were good at. When I asked about his car, he would say that they had precisely the car they needed (not an inch larger or fancier than necessary). Ole's simple lunch is another example of how he valued modesty: Denmark is a country where lunch is eaten with a knife and fork. Bread usually comes with several types of spread and dressings. A thin slice of yesterday's rye bread with a small piece of cheese that covered less than one third of the bread, combined with Ole's choice of instant coffee over 'real' coffee were clear value markers of a modest consumer: he could certainly afford the time and money to buy himself real coffee and a fancier lunch.

Ole continuously strived to meet his customers' desires, often at the cost of his own. For example, Marie and Ole had planned for it to be just the two of them in the bakery, with shorter opening hours and fewer products. However, their customers' demand for a greater variety of products soon pushed them to start making different breads, cakes, buns and other pastries that they had originally not wanted to do. They also extended their opening hours and expanded the business with more and more employees.

By the time I met Ole and Marie, they had secretly started planning to close the business down. Although financially successful, they told me in confidence that they were unhappy with the situation. They did not want to work such long hours and wanted fewer products and no employees. But they also admitted that they did not want to let down their customers. They could not meet both their own and their customers' desires, because the customers were more than they could handle. The year after I left Aarhus, they closed their very successful and economically profitable bakery and

opened a small bakery in a different, much smaller town with fewer inhabitants. Their new bakery had shorter opening hours (from 11:30 AM to 5:30 PM), no employees and sold a small selection of bread and cheese.

Like Sally, Ole and Marie wanted to be viewed as good people. However, when the desire to be good and live good – to meet others’ desires as well as their own desires – could not be reconciled, they chose to escape from the situation in order to satisfy their own needs. This showed that social recognition and self-fulfilment came secondary to the value they placed on their freedom to control their own firm through a balance between work and life. In Aarhus, Marie and Ole had to work harder than they were willing to because of their firm’s popularity. By moving to a smaller town with fewer inhabitants, they were able to re-establish the firm as they had first intended it to be, with shorter opening hours and a limited assortment, and without the risk of growing beyond a size the two of them could handle. They hoped that their customers and employees would not be too disappointed with their decision.

### *Julian, the Goldsmith: ‘Here They Get Something More Than Just the Jewellery; They Don’t Get That at the Chain Stores’*

Julian was a goldsmith in his fifties. Like Marie and Ole with their bakery, becoming a goldsmith had been a conscious choice he had made well into his adult life. Previously, he had been a manager with hundreds of employees for an IT business when he decided to do something completely different. Together with his wife, he decided to quit his job and sell his €100,000 sports car and his three-storey town house in downtown Aarhus and move to a small town outside to start studying at a goldsmith’s academy. For the first few years after his studies, he worked in commercial jewellery shops, but he soon missed being creative and working for himself.

Julian then got an offer of a lease on a six square-metre business premises, or rather a ‘room’, with no bathroom or running water, in downtown Aarhus, where he established his own goldsmith’s workshop and shop. He had spent the money from selling his sports car on buying enough raw materials to get started. He and his wife made an agreement whereby she would pay the bills while he would contribute whatever he could until he started making money.

After a year, Julian was offered a larger room, but it was still no more than approximately fifteen square meters. He now shared a toilet with a fashion shop and therefore had access to water. He installed a sink at the back of the premises and placed a worktable in the middle. The main thing was that he was doing what he wanted to do; the surroundings did not have to be comfortable or luxurious. By the time I met him, his firm had become

profitable, but he was only taking on the projects he wanted to do. If a customer came to his shop seeking something that that did not allow him a certain amount of artistic freedom, he advised them to go elsewhere. Like Marie and Ole, he was more concerned with living life the way he wanted than in making big profits.

Julian said that his customers got more from him than they did at any other jewellers, and there was no doubt that the jewellery he produced was better than commercial, mass-produced pieces. Julian made each and every piece of jewellery with his own hands, meaning each piece was unique. He planned the process together with the customer, and it was usual for a customer to make multiple visits and spend hours at a time with him. He did not offer mass-produced commodities. Like the other business owners working in niche economies, he expressed a desire for recognition and self-fulfilment that was not grounded in the wish for profits. Of course, it was in his interest to make a profit, as for any business owner; however, he claimed ethical superiority over larger commercial businesses. He referred to small, locally produced, hand-made, unique jewellery as better than mass-produced items. In addition, Julian strove to use only recycled gold and silver, as well as packaging that was certified as organic and that claimed to be 'environmentally sustainable' (*bæredygtighed*). He also offered lower prices to customers on a low income, a practice that likely made him feel good about himself.

Julian's success in gaining recognition was reflected in social media posts, such as Instagram and Facebook, where many customers posted their appreciation of the process and final products. Customers described multiple visits where Julian always took the time to listen, share ideas, and share his dedication and knowledge about the production process and the history and origin of the different materials he used. During the time I spent in Julian's shop, I regularly experienced customers coming by after receiving their finished order to show their appreciation, sometimes in the form of a note or card.

As we know, Julian left a financially more lucrative life in search of job satisfaction. His example shows that for him a meaningful life was dependent on the activities and outcome of his work. However, the work itself was not enough for a good life. He also expressed a desire for social recognition and to be ethical and environmental in his practices. His work was art, and he took pride in producing, exhibiting and sharing it with people and putting in an honest worker's effort (Hann 2018). Julian was convinced the job and his surroundings were more meaningful and 'better' than that of his corporate colleagues.

Although social recognition and self-fulfilment seemed to be important to Julian, he adjusted his schedule and work hours according to his own

preference. If he wanted a few days off with his daughters or to join an event somewhere in the city during his usual opening hours, he did not hesitate to close the shop. In fact, Julian had several handwritten posters ready to put on the door to inform customers that he had taken some time off (a day, an hour or two, or only for 'a moment') to do something other than work. At other times, when he felt like working more or had many interesting projects on the go simultaneously, he would work from early morning to late at night in order to meet deadlines. Julian would not reject inspiring, creative ideas, but he never took on more than he felt like doing.

Taken together, Julian's statements and actions suggest that his main motivation for self-employment was his desire for control and freedom. Julian exercised control and freedom in choosing which projects to take on, the hours he would work and his flexibility with opening hours. Unlike Marie and Ole, who offered everyday items of consumption and were therefore tied to regular opening hours, Julian was much freer to deviate from regular opening hours without disappointing his customers. Julian could make appointments with customers and in this way fulfil his desire to be away from the shop without deviating from his moral obligation to his customers.

## **Social Recognition, Self-Fulfilment, Freedom and Control**

Social theories across disciplines have argued that one basic human need is approval from one's peers (e.g. Durkheim 1965; Aristotle 2011). Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs places esteem second highest in his pyramid of human needs, defining it as prestige and a feeling of achievement in the social community, surpassed only by self-actualization, which is about achieving one's full potential (Maslow 1943). The business owners featured in this chapter were greatly concerned with pleasing their customers and saw virtue in doing good for others. They enjoyed the social recognition they received in terms of customer appreciation of the products and services they offered. However, based on these business owners' actions and choices, I suggest that they were more concerned with the freedom and control that comes from being a business owner than they were with social recognition or self-actualization, even if these were certainly part of the picture. These business owners acted in a moral economy in which they strove to balance their own desire for freedom and control with the obligation to fulfil the needs and expectations of customers. Julian was morally obliged to fulfil his customers' needs but only as long as they shared his values of quality and uniqueness. We see that the actors in this moral economy could establish a mutual relationship with customers because they shared

the same values and understanding of what is good and important in the economic sphere (things such as quality, expertise, local or ethical production and, often, hand-made products). Customers were morally or socially qualified to establish a mutual economic relationship with the niche business owners.

My data suggests that self-fulfilment and social recognition became secondary when a desire for freedom and control was not being satisfied. Marie and Ole did not prioritize their Aarhus customers when they chose to close the business and move to another city. Julian enjoyed the positive reviews of his customers, and he listened to their wishes, but he did not hesitate to disappoint a customer if they wanted him to design something that did not fit with his own ideas about what was good design. Operating in a 'moral economy' has its limits if social recognition by the community comes at the cost of limiting individual freedom.

## Being Good

Émile Durkheim argued that morality consists of a combination of desire and obligation, a system that is intrinsically social (Durkheim 2010: 17). Within the desire for esteem or social recognition, being accepted as good in the community ranks high. However, I suggest that the business owners' desire to offer 'ethical commerce' was not motivated mainly by the desire to be accepted as good. The emphasis on ethical business was just as much a way to differentiate themselves from the mainstream market and thus attract customers and ensure profit. Sally's stress on the distinction between unethical 'others' and her own ethical firm was essential to her success. Although there is no doubt that all business owners were genuinely concerned with fair prices, good working conditions for employees, locally produced goods with low-carbon footprints and products that were made to last, they were all traits that appealed to the customer. The business owners were concerned to adhere to what they understood to be the norms and obligations they shared with their customers, but they were also sensitive to the local variations in ideas about what was just and fair and good. They considered their own actions and choices to stay small in their niche economies as a matter of being true to themselves and what they perceived as important values: honest work, fair prices and ethical hours of work for their employees (Miller 1998; Wheeler 2012). Although the business owners agreed that it was important to them to contribute something positive to the local community, their main motivation for opening their own businesses was the freedom to control their own work and lives.

## Concluding Remarks

The three business owners we have met in this chapter were all concerned with ethics. Marie and Ole cared about ‘just prices’, Sally about ‘just working conditions’ and ‘fair salaries’. Julian was ‘fair’ and offered lower prices to customers with lower incomes. They were all concerned with ethical production and producing ‘organically’. The shop owners’ search for recognition demonstrates the importance goodness had in their life.

Ideas of fairness are also reflected in the world happiness reports, where Denmark’s population scores high (Frederiksen 2019; ‘Danmark er verdens næstlykkeligste land’ 2019). In a society where all basic needs are secured, as in Denmark, the way to happiness is a virtuous life in which good actions are crucial in order to succeed. When Polanyi (2001 [1944]) argued against *homo economicus* in *The Great Transformation*, he put forward empirical evidence that humans are ethical creatures whose actions are based on feelings and desires that are related to social affiliation. In these examples, we see that the community decides the rules regarding what is good and what is not. Individuals strive to achieve recognition by following the norms and ethical guidelines of their own society. The British working class described by Thompson (2010 [1971]) was characterized by mutual understandings of solidarity and justice, and the double movement described by Polanyi (2001 [1944]) showed how people rejected the disembedding of the economy in a self-regulating market. Both these examples show that individuals as part of a mass are concerned with ethics of justice and solidarity. The same sentiments were used in the construction of the Scandinavian welfare states, which persuaded their respective populations to trust the state to distribute welfare equally in a just system marked by solidarity (Bendixen, Bringslid, and Vike 2018; Vike 2018).

So, what have we learned from the ideas and actions of a few small, independent Danish business owners? In common with other human beings, they had a desire to be judged as good by their peers. They acted in a moral economy where they were concerned with managing firms that contribute something good to the community they were part of. But more importantly, they were motivated to create good lives for themselves, by balancing the need to make a profit and please others with the need for freedom and control. The moral economy at work was seen in the way the owners organized their work and sales relationships in mutuality with their customers and by appealing to ethics. Ole and Marie cared about minimizing ecological damage by buying only from organic producers. They also cared about pleasing their customers’ desires for fresh bread, cheap prices and suitable opening hours. Julian was concerned with offering his customers something unique: he wanted them to feel good in knowing that the jewellery they buy from

him is unique. Sally cared about providing her customers with something that lasts ‘a lifetime’.

Moreover, they all placed themselves and their ways of doing business in opposition to large firms who mass produce. They expressed their discontent with mass consumer culture and strove to offer something they believed is better for the community. In philosophical conversations and guided interviews, they all expressed a desire to do something different. They had all been employed in different sectors before they started their own firms. They were all motivated by the desire to be their own boss and create a good life for themselves.

However, they are not examples of ethically concerned business owners but of owners on a quest for the good life. All three business owners were concerned with the freedom to do things on their own terms, and in Ole and Marie’s and Julian’s case they were perhaps prisoners of this need up to the point where they broke loose to do their own thing and /or closed their business to start over again, hoping that the next time they would be able to manage things according to their own needs and desires.

**Anne-Erita G. Berta** received her doctorate in social anthropology from the Martin Luther University, Halle-Wittenberg, Germany in 2019. From 2014 until 2019, she was a member of the research group ‘Realising Eurasia’ at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, also in Halle. She conducted fieldwork first in Sumatra, Indonesia, and for her doctoral degree in Jutland, Denmark, where she studied the everyday lives and values of small business owners. Her research, primarily in economic anthropology, focuses on business values, morality, markets and work, as well as family and religion. Presently, she is working on her first book based on her research in Denmark.

## Notes

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1. Niche businesses are small businesses specialized in one or a few particular, possibly unique products, services or themes. The businesses in this chapter include a bakery that hand-makes cakes with organic ingredients on-site, a jeweller who makes unique, handcrafted pieces and a toy shop specializing in non-plastic, chemical-free toys.
2. I conducted fieldwork in Aarhus between 2015–2016, where I spent most of my time with the owners of six different independent businesses and interviewed an-

other 32 business owners between one and six times; in this chapter I concentrate on just three of the businesses I studied.

3. Chris Hann argues, for instance, that Didier Fassin's (2009: 1249) understanding of a moral economy as 'the production, distribution, circulation, and use of moral sentiments, emotions and values, and norms and obligations in social space' is too broad (Hann 2018: 229).
4. These individuals are citizens of one of the world's most successful welfare states, with a high level of social security. The likelihood of attaining one's desired life is notably higher here than in a society where universal welfare rights are absent and the economy is more turbulent. However, I stress that in general these business owners are representative of the average Danish citizen and should not be confused with the more privileged business elites in Danish society.
5. Nineteen of these reviews were selected randomly from Facebook and 66 were google reviews. The bakery had received five out of five stars and exclusively positive comments in all 197 of their Facebook reviews. The goldsmith had five out of five in 71 reviews.

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