Hidden Hands in Fair Trade

Nicaraguan migrants and the labour process in the Costa Rican coffee harvest

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Abstract

Fair trade marketing commonly focuses on the figure of the smallholding peasant producer. This paper locates

Introduction

The marketing of fair trade commonly emphasizes and plays upon an association with small farmers and families. This strategy is effective because it evokes populist images of smallholders working their own land and struggling to remain independent and autonomous, as the market inexorably draws them and their labour into commodity markets. In Europe, Costa Rica, and elsewhere, coffee economies are taken as representative of such small farm enterprises, compromised by depersonalised and exploitative global exchanges. This paper unmasks this culturally appealing morality tale by examining the political economy of coffee production in northwest Costa Rica. Documenting class and gender in coffee production, and in particular the role of landless labourers, women, and migrant harvesters from Nicaragua, exposes differentiation in the 'smallholder' economy.

The primary data come from 14 months of anthropological fieldwork carried out between 1998 and 1999, and in 2003, in the rural highlands of Costa Rica, near the town of Tilarán in Guanacaste Province. Interviews with about 150 coffee farmers revealed their reliance upon migrant Nicaraguan labour, and the anxieties attached to this dependence. Data on two areas with similar populations are particularly revealing as regards differences in labour relations. Campos de Oro is a specialist coffee-producing zone with 54 coffee farmers, of whom 12 combine the crop with cattle farming, and only 7 landless families. By contrast, El Dos has 32 landless residents, and only 15 coffee specialists, with 34 landowners producing beef or milk, or combining coffee with livestock (see Table 2). These differences in the kind of agriculture practiced, the class structure of the two settlements, and availability of work, have significant impact on the social relations of production. Migrants gravitate towards Campos de Oro where remuneration is higher; in El Dos farmers rely more heavily on the labour of residents, but often experience problems gathering the crop as the harvest peaks, because they have difficulties attracting outside workers.

All the farmers are members of the Coopeldos coffee cooperative, which was founded in 1971 by a group of producers seeking better prices for their crop. The principle remit of the cooperative is to process and market the members' coffee; it also actively engages in a wide range of development programmes. The cooperative has supplied northern fair trade markets since the mid-1980s, and certified organic coffee since the late 1990s. Instrumental in accessing these niche markets is

something outside itself. In the case of coffee that 'other' is a combination of self-exploitation by peasant farmers whose labour subsidises production costs, and a reserve army of harvest labourers. In this sense, farmers, being agricultural workers and employers, 'have a "contradictory class position" as both exploiters and exploited' (Guthman, 2004, p. 76). The state clearly plays a key role in capitalist accumulation by maintaining the marginal and informal status of workers, whose impoverishment ensures a compliant seasonal workforce (Peet and Watts, 1996, p. 9). But at the local level, the ethnography shows how the contradictions that originates in the forcing down of prices by competitive capitalist markets lead to tensions and resistances between farmers and workers, that are played out in the micro-politics of everyday life.

Conflicts over material interests, and the symbolic forms that are employed to express and contest experiences of exploitation, has been a major theme in anthropology (Taussig, 1980; Scott, 1985; Ong, 1987; Freeman, 2000; Yelvington, 1995), and this paper follows that tradition. Like Ortiz (1999), the aim is to document how farmers and workers negotiate tensions and uncertainties in the coffee industry. To that extent the focus is on material processes rather than symbolic expressions of resistance; where symbolism does emerge is in the importance given to family farming. Unfortunately, the emphasis on small family farmers mystifies and masks contradictions. My argument is that if it is to make a difference, and distinguish itself as a politicised alternative, fair trade needs to take account of local realities, not be complicit in dominant representations, and insist on labour codes in 'small farmer' economies.

Fair trade and the charm of the family farm

The inspiration behind fair trade is the desire to reveal the social and environmental conditions of production. A number of recent studies have discussed this as a process of defetishisation, while remaining alive to the potential for refetishisation (Hudson and Hudson, 2003; Luetchford, 2007; Lyon, 2006). How effectively fair trade exposes social and environmental factors in production to consumers is an important question, but one outcome of the focus upon the consumer – producer relationship is to mystify social relations of production, or the political economy of coffee growing. That is, there is a tendency to continue to fetishise the small-farmer model. This contradicts the evidence from anthropologists, and others

> human breed quite different from the *criollo* of Chile, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela or Guatemala. In the yeoman there germinated the first traces of what would, during the nineteenth century, become the Costa Rican people (Monge, 1989, pp. 11-12).

The figure of the yeoman is social and political, as well as economic. Monge continues by equating the yeoman farmer with the peculiarly democratic tradition of the country; for "a great love of democracy lies in his soul" and "(t)o understand the special concern for liberty that Costa Ricans have always shown, the respect of the country's leaders, for law and for human life, one must know the yeoman who labored upon the land. This is the axis, the backbone of our history, the nucleus of Costa Rican society" (1989, p. 12).

In sum, there is a close association between the smallholding, independent, peasant farmer, living in a classless rural society, and national identity. Although this interpretation of history has been challenged, in particular the dispersed settlement pattern and equality in poverty thesis (Gudmundson, 1986), it is alive and well in national discourse. In effectively debunking what he calls "one of the most attractive and widely disseminated national mythologies of any Latin American nation", Gudmundson seeks to correct serious flaws in the model of pre-capitalist Costa Rica. Nevertheless, in the same passage he goes on to admit that the model is not without foundation, and that the "historical and historiographical origins, ideological variations, and major hypotheses of the rural democratic model are complex and worth exploring" (1986, p. 1). This vision indicates a historically continuous national identification with small landowners, in the face of which landlessness and reliance on migrant labour is an inconvenience, not least when cooperatives and associations of small producers seek to capitalize in markets on the basis of their yeoman identity.

In accordance with this national identity, the Costa Rican cooperatives that deal with northern fair trade markets emphasize this small farmer identity in bulletins, histories, and interviews. In addition, reference is repeatedly made to their historical experience of marginality and relative poverty. Such self-representation informs most of what these cooperatives do; it is what they have long struggled against in the modernizing mission to "sow progress",[2] which began in the 1980s, and was designed to lift the members of these marginal cooperatives out of poverty. For example, Juan Carlos, the manager of Coopeldos, describes the Guanacaste of his childhood as "one of the most marginalized and economically underdeveloped parts of the country". Likewise, in 1998 the manager of Coocafé in his tenth anniversary address spoke of "resolving with valour and solid and practical plans, the problems of the small and marginal coffee producer". The background to these statements is the long history of struggle between coffee growers and elite processing families, in which farmers accused the coffee oligarchy of systematic exploitation that reduced them to poverty (Acuña Ortega, 1985, 1987; González Ortega, 1987). What is more, the Coocafé cooperatives are able to represent themselves as marginal in the national coffee sector, since they are situated away from the premium production zones in the Central Valley.

Areas of land under coffee cultivation, as documented in Table 1, supports the claim that the Coocafé cooperatives have a membership of small farmers. Consider 25 or 30 *fanegas* a reasonable, but not exceptional, return per hectare.[3] On this basis the majority of farmers in Coocafé could be expected to é c7w5.1(processing)]TJ0Tc0.1]TJ036 TD2a2

web sites that seek to raise awareness of the relation between exchange and ethics. The more politicised trade justice movement tackles the operations of global capitalism, denounces current trade terms, and emphasizes the resultant exploitation of farmers in the market, and workers in plantations and factories. Fair trade also identifies exploitation in conventional markets and pitches itself in opposition to the mainstream.[4] The iconic figure through which it does this is the small producer; frequent reference is made to people working their own land, family labour, wives, husbands and children.[5] The intended effect is to 'personalise' exchange relations, but the idioms feed into a populist imaginary.

In my kitchen are two examples of fair trade packaging. The first is a tin from France; Café Malongo has a photo of a smiling group of Latin American women and men, surrounded by sacks. The words alongside the picture tell us the content is "Arabica from the culture of small producers".[6] The second is Equal Exchange Organic Fairtrade Tea. Again, there is a charming photograph of women picking tea, with folded umbrellas strapped to their heads. In one corner is the fair trade logo, which "guarantees a better deal for Third World producers". In the small print we learn the tea comes from smallholder farmers with many years experience, who send their product "from the garden to the cup". Under the words "another step forward" we read that "small-scale farmers from the Sahyaadri Farmers Consortium grow tea and manufacture it in their own modern factory". On-line, the message that links fair trade to small farmers, and families is reiterated. Taking the case of Costa Rica, for example; we can meet Isabel and Rudolfo, who are "passionate about their children" and education, and farm two hectares of coffee.[7] On another link we are introduced to Francisco, William and José from Coop Montes de Oro, Costa Rica.[8] They are "all married with children", and "appreciate the freedom of being small producers".

While I do not wish to question these statements, we would do well to interrogate what the term small farmer evokes, and what is hidden behind it. Like "authentic", and "local" (Pratt, 2007), the power of the idea of the small producer lies in its ability to carry a range of overlapping culturally appealing meanings. First, there is the idea of independence – to own land is to have the capacity to produce one's own livelihood. The opportunity to sell the products of one's own labour in markets is attractive to the right, since it avoids the proletarian trap and its socinotheroariure it84. .i8dertonea fr2130.000137j6(tonea fr)8e"

more subtle variations in light and shade, exposure and shelter; cropping varies between neighbouring *cafetales*

owner's dairy. As he said: 'no one can tell me who to pick for'.

Harvesters work in teams, which in the smaller *cafetales* of El Dos usually vary from between three or four individuals, up to about ten. Each worker is assigned a row of bushes and removes all ripe fruit from one plant, before moving on to the next, and so on, down the row. Picking is dirty work, and can be cold and wet, so old clothes are worn, with waterproofs or black bin-liners, as well as rubber boots and a hat for protection from sun and rain. The fruit is collected in a large basket, which is secured to the waist of the picker by means of a rope and a discarded agricultural sack. Most harvesters also carry a wire hook attached to a length of string. The hook is placed over a branch, which is then pulled down towards the picker who holds it in place by standing on the end of the cord, leaving the branch steady and both hands free to work.

The harvester removes all the red fruit as well as that which is 'coloured' yellow or orange, and therefore ripening. In theory all green coffee needs to be left for future rounds. In practice some of this unripe coffee falls into the basket, as do leaves and other detritus. The aim of the picker is to work at speed but to minimise the amount of unwanted material to a level acceptable to the owner. The coffee in an individual's basket is scrutinised by the producer and assessed as to how clean (*limpio*) or dirty (*sucio*) it is. For the farmer the purity of the work is of primary interest, but the picker is more concerned with volume, and talk amongst harvesters centres upon how much coffee is available on the bush, how 'good' or 'bad' it is, and how fast (*rapido*) or slowly (*lerdo*) they work. In this respect coffee picking can be described as semi-skilled; the work itself is repetitive and monotonous, but at the same time it requires dexterity, and speed improves with practice. The trick is to maximise return (by way of quantity picked), but at the same time meet the minimum requirements for purity. The grower's interest in the quality of the coffee is maintained by the cooperative, which measures the percentage of green coffee and dross in a sample, and sanctions those delivering unacceptably impure loads. Since green coffee is paid at a lower rate than the ripe product, the system of surveillance practised by the cooperative over farmers' consignments encourages growers to monitor and control the work of the pickers.

From the basket the coffee is transferred to a sack, and finally measured in a box (*cajuela*) at the end of the day. In the 1998-1999 season the rate paid per box fluctuated around 275 *colones* ($US 1.00), although I heard reports of one farmer paying as much as 400 *colones*. A poor day's picking would yield only four or five boxes, but on a good day a fast picker can gather 12 or 15, and legends abound of individuals picking up to 20 boxes in one day. Income during the harvest therefore depends on the dexterity and experience of the picker, not least in judging where to pick next, and managing the social relationships such movement requires. Information on harvesting opportunities is an important topic for conversation; I was often given advice about where to work next, and the rates being offered by different farmers. Some owners pay a higher price to compensate for poor pickings early and late in the season. Others argue that keeping the same rate throughout the season is fair as it balances out in the long run. Although farmers claimed to come to an agreement about rates of payment for the coming season, workers and landowners generally negotiate before work commences. The agreed price per *cajuela* is said to be a reflection of the current market, so pickers bear some of the brunt of price falls. In 1999 prices were hovering at around $US 100, and farmers were predicting a drop in the rate they would pay. The relation between coffee prices and harvest payments may be one way that fair trade deals 'trickle-down' to the landless, and at least one farmer made the explicit point that higher prices and fair trade premiums meant he could afford to pay pickers a higher rate.

In this section we have seen how the fluctuation in labour requirements ties landowners, and particularly coffee farmers, into economic and social relationships with the landless, permanent and semi-permanent residents. Reciprocal agreements to offer work and accommodation, and provide labour involves a degree of strategising, yet those who identify, are identified with, and can activate a sense of social responsibility always appear to gain access to sufficient work to satisfy basic needs. Many of the more industrious claimed there was always work available, whilst even people not known for hard work seemed to find occasional labour when they required it. One semi-retired individual was particularly renowned for being work-shy, but he was able to get odd jobs outside the harvest season, and sometimes took part in community work projects. As one landowner put it: 'he is not a good labourer, but he needs money, so I give him work'.

Migrant workers

As the coffee harvest gathers momentum towards the end of the year, the labour problem intensifies to the point that local workers cannot satisfy demand. However, from September onwards, temporary workers come to the Tilarán Highlands from Nicaragua. Most immigrants have no work permits, and many walk long distances to avoid border controls. These arrivals form part of a larger picture of economic migration into the country.[14] Because of their transient and informal status it is difficult to estimate numbers entering the El Dos area, but two separate farmers gave a figure of 'around 300' for Campos de Oro, where there are about 100 coffee growers registered as members of the cooperative.[15]

The first Nicaraguan migrants were brought into the area 20 years previously by the owners of a private coffee enterprise and processing plant in nearby Turín. To run a large estate requires a considerable workforce, and even today the Turín operation employs about 30 Nicaraguans for the harvest season, as well as a dozen or more on a permanent basis. The influx of migrants has escalated over the years, and was exacerbated by the Sandinista-US backed Contra war of the 1980s. A number of farmers recalled finding workers in refugee hostels in nearby Tilarán, and although these no longer exist, the Nicaraguans continue to arrive in search of work. Often they come in family groups, or friends join forces and make the trip together. Many visit year after year, and some stay to work, and can eventually gain citizenship by taking advantage of government amnesties.

What remains beyond doubt is the reliance of the small coffee farmers on these temporary visitors. The cooperative continues its ambitious expansion programme, and in discussions many residents would rhetorically question who would pick the new coffee coming into production. The answer, of course, is women and Nicaraguan, or *nica*, migrant labourers.[16] The *nicas* are valued for their strength of constitution and capacity for hard work. They are considered "good workers" and "valiant" when it comes to facing the elements, and they continue to pick through the worst storms and winter squalls. The ability to work hard is esteemed; manual agricultural labourers "work the hardest, but earn the least", and Nicaraguans are not exempt from this judgment. Yet the central role played by these temporary foreign workers in the economic life of the coffee farmers creates a series of tensions and uneasily resolved problems. Nicaraguans come 'in need of work' and have the necessary qualities, but they are also feared and mistrusted, and their position is an ambiguous one. They are *of* the community, but not *in* it (Kearney, 1996, p.167); they are indispensable to the local economy, but come and go as they please, and so are almost impossible to trace or hold to agreements. A house near my own contained three migrants at the beginning of one week, then five, followed by eight, then five again, only to be left empty before the week was up. It is not therefore surprising that a number of rather fraught opinions circulate as regards these dangerously necessary visitors. Not only do judgments vary considerably from one person to the next as to the merits, or otherwise, of *nicas*, but also distinct andone.

the area, and one farmer claimed to always carry a pistol when dealing with them.

However, the wild reputation of the Nicaraguan has its compensations. They are renowned for their hardiness; they are said not to need beds, and it is claimed they sleep happily on the floor, “like dogs”. Some I met had walked for days over the mountains, without money or possessions. In their own country they generally constitute the dispossessed rural poor, and when they can find work there it is often only for food, or a dollar a day if they are paid. They can earn this in one hour working in the coffee harvest in Costa Rica. Some have land, or a house, in their own country, which encourages their return; others remain peripheral visitors to the Costa Rican economy, floating between work opportunities, rural and urban contexts. Fernando is typical of such a marginal migrant. He left his own country when his house was burnt down by Sandinistas, and had worked cropping pineapples in the south of Costa Rica, as a labourer in construction in San José, and then found his way to El Dos for the coffee picking season. He remained afterwards as a semi-employed day-labourer, but always talked of returning to his own country.

Nicaraguans are drawn into the social relations of production and their role is indispensable. Some growers do manage without resorting to employing the visitors, particularly in El Dos, where conditions for coffee are not so favourable and less ripens at one time. Here there are more work opportunities; dairies and the cooperative generate alternative employment. The nursery is also sited in El Dos and provides both temporary and permanent work. These opportunities support resident workers, who can then be mobilised for coffee harvesting. In Campos de Oro, by contrast, more coffee is grown and more comes to fruition at any one time. This increases the pressure on labour at harvest time. Nearly all residents either own a *cafetal* or are tied into an agreement, which gives them effective rights and responsibilities with respect to a particular grove; it also means most permanent inhabitants have coffee to attend to, and there is less of a floating labour force. It is here many of the migrants end up working; they pass through El Dos and may even stay a few days, but they soon learn of more lucrative harvests across the valley, and disappear as suddenly and mysteriously as they arrived.

The migrant is an elusive figure, and the limited ability of farmers to control them at harvest time increases the uncertainty of coffee production. To be successful growers require more than agricultural expertise, they also need to juggle the labour process. Landowners and more permanent residents may strategise and negotiate, but their interests are longer-term and therefore more predictable. The temporary migrants need have no such allegiance. Their aim is to maximise return over the two or three months they are required, after which they melt back over the border, or are absorbed into the informal economy in another part of Costa Rica. Although they are necessary to pick the coffee, because of their informal status they compromise the ability of farmers to control relations of production and increase the contingency and unpredictability of the productive process.

Conclusions

A major benefit associated with coffee farming, and one often referred to by growers, is the employment it generates.[17] As a labour intensive industry with a high rate of return per hectare it is suited to small landowners with large families, and said to encourage equity in the social distribution of wealth and resources. This is where Costa Rican ‘coffee culture’ meets the rural democratic model of national mythology. As many people around El Dos pointed out, a farm of 30 hectares supports only

assumptions about economic forms are maintained and reproduced. Thirdly, fair trade must retain a political edge if it is not to become another form of fetishised commodity. It already allows for labour relations and conditions on tea estates and in the cut flower industry – it also needs to take account of the social relations of production and conditions in 'small farmer' economies. Lastly, much of the fair trade literature to date focuses 'up' from 'producers' (which usually, somewhat bafflingly, refers to cooperatives and administrators) and their relations with NGOs and consumers. But we also need to focus 'down' on relationships between growers and their cooperatives (Luetchford, 2007) and, as in this paper, between farmers and workers; if we want to make shorter circuits between producers and consumers then we, and fair trade groups, need more information on the organization of production in specific industries.

Notes

[1] A clear example of this is the increased profits generated by supermarkets on fair trade goods, as revealed in the BBC2 documentary in the Money Programme series, 'Not-so-Fair Trade' (2006)

[2] "We sow progress", or "*sembramos progreso*" is the motto of the Coopeldos cooperative.

[3] One *fanega* is 400 litres by volume unprocessed coffee, it is the measure used at the processing plant.

[4] See, for example http://www.fairtrade.net/producers.html, and http://www.maketradefair.comes_-0.0ET4 ple996 1refBT0002 Tc547 TD0s 0 0-0.0ET4 Tw[(http://www.fair tr)6.7(ade 279)1.6(er' bafT*0o18

[15] This figure will include some members who no longer produce coffee, and, more im

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Annex

Table 1. Classification of Coocafé producers by coffee production in *fanegas* (1998-1999).

Production in fanegas	Number of producers	% of producers	Total production	% of production
1 – 40	2,548	83.1	29,961	42
40 – 80	329	10.7	15,859	22
80 – 10	115	3.7	9,282	13
120 – 240	49	1.6	8,180	11
240 – 350	14	0.5	4,155	6
350 – 500	9	0.3	2,350	3
500 – 750	1	0.0	625	1
More than 750	3	0.1	1,500	2
Totals	3,068	100	71,912	100

Source: Coocafé R.L., Alajuela, Costa Rica.

Table 2. Agricultural activities by farm size: El Dos and Campos de Oro (1998).

	El Dos		Campos de Oro	
Activity	Total farms	Average area (hectares)	Total farms	Average area (hectares)
Coffee only	15	1.2	42	1.9
Dairy only	8	12	-	-
Beef only	3	45	1	-
Coffee + Dairy	7	19	1	-
Coffee + Beef	8	39	11	45*
Dairy + Beef	7	59	-	-
Coffee + Dairy + Beef	1	30	4	223
Totals	49	29.3	59	26**
Landless Households	32	-	7	-
Landowners not producing coffee, milk, beef for market	3	0.7	1	0.5
Total Households	84		67	

Source: data compiled by author during fieldwork interviews.

*This figure is distorted by one landowner with 350 hectares, without him the average drops to 14 hectares.