



Fairtrade bananas in the Caribbean: Towards a moral economy of recognition



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ABSTRACT

Working through a Caribbean case study, this paper examines the networks and associations of Fair Trade bananas as they move both materially and morally from farms in St Vincent and the Grenadines to supermarkets and households in the United Kingdom. In doing so, the paper provides grounded empirical evidence of Fair Trade's moral economy as experienced by banana producers in the Caribbean. The paper follows Nancy Fraser's distinction between ways of framing justice to argue that, in order to transcend its complex postcolonial positionalities, the Fair Trade Foundation needs to include recognition in its moral economy as well as representation and redistribution. The paper compares the moral framework of Fair Trade as an ideology and social movement with the lived experience of certified Fairtrade banana farmers in the Windward Islands who work mostly *for*, rather than *within*, an idealized moral economy. The paper also contributes to several recent debates in the agri-food literature exploring the interconnections between production and consumption, the role of materiality in contemporary food networks, the historical and (post)colonial nature of food moralities, and links between political and moral economies of food. Following an outline of recent debates about the moral economies of food and its relation to Fair Trade as a movement, the paper dissects the moral economy of the Fairtrade Foundation, highlighting the historical and geographical, material and symbolic, gendered and generational ways that food producers in the Global South (in this case, banana farmers in St Vincent and the Grenadines) may be counterposed to 'responsible' consumers in the Global North. Despite the good intentions of those who promote the Fair Trade movement through the Fairtrade Foundation and the Fairtrade Labelling Organisation (FLO), our case study reveals a moral economy of non- (or partial) recognition, which has a range of unintended consequences and paradoxical effects.

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1. Introduction

Working through a Caribbean case study, this paper examines the networks and associations of Fair Trade bananas as they move both materially and morally from farms in St Vincent and the Grenadines to supermarkets and households in the United Kingdom. In doing so, we provide grounded empirical evidence of Fair Trade's moral economy as experienced by banana producers in the Caribbean. In particular, we follow Nancy Fraser's important distinction between different ways of framing justice through which she sought to clarify how economic disadvantage and cultural disrespect are intertwined and mutually supportive. Seeking to transcend divisions on the Left, Fraser (2000) described her project as the development of a critical theory of recognition that identifies

and defends only those versions of the cultural politics of difference that can be coherently combined with the social politics of equality. She later proposed a distinction between different ways of framing justice, including the politics of representation, redistribution, and recognition (Fraser, 2009). Deploying these ideas, we argue (particularly in parts 2 and 3) that the Fair Trade Foundation needs to include *recognition* in its moral economy as well as representation and redistribution, in order to transcend the complex postcolonial positionalities which enmesh Vincentians as *producers* while actors in the global North are enmeshed as *consumers* (cf. Mansvelt, 2005: 85). The paper compares the moral framework of Fair Trade as an ideology and social movement with the lived experience of certified Fairtrade banana farmers in the Windward Islands who work mostly *for*, rather than *within*, an idealized western idea of moral economy.

The paper contributes to recent work that interrogates the universality of alternative food networks and their norms as

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conceptualized and practiced in western contexts (Wilson, forthcoming). By using a case study of the lived experiences of Caribbean banana farmers, we seek to animate geographical research into Fair Trade in disciplines such as human geography by questioning the 'democratic legitimacy of norms' (Fraser, 2009: 28) perpetuated by Fair Trade and similar environmental and social justice movements. Like other work on Fair Trade (e.g. Freidberg, 2003; Lyon and Moberg, 2010; Mutersbaugh and Lyon, 2010; Besky, 2014), we illustrate the historical and postcolonial nature of food moralities such as the Fair Trade movement¹ by arguing that banana farmers in St Vincent have become 'emplaced' (Mansvelt, 2005: 85) in Fair Trade networks in ways that reinforce historical and geographical divides between producers in the (post)colonial world and consumers in the 'developed' world. Apart from this work, the paper also builds on recent arguments about the intersection of moral and political economies of food of which there are now an increasing number of examples (e.g. Busch, 2000; Le Heron and Hayward, 2002; Mincyte, 2014; Wilson, 2012, 2014a). Some writers such as Morgan et al. (2006) have identified political and moral economies with two competing tendencies or 'meta-regulatory trends' within contemporary agri-food markets: a 'neo-liberal economy' (characterized by increasingly globalized supply chains, the continued intensification of agricultural production and an ever-increasing concentration of retail power) and a 'new moral economy' (characterized by the development of alternative food networks, a return to more localized modes of production and more sustainable forms of consumption). Jackson et al. (2007) have argued, however, that this contrast can be overdrawn as 'mainstream' food producers have begun to see the commercial potential in appropriating the language of 'alternative' food networks, while 'alternative' systems of provisioning (such as the production of organic food) are increasingly falling into the hands of larger-scale producers and retailers (cf. Guthman, 2003, 2004). Rather than counter-posing moral and political economies of food, therefore, this paper seeks to show how the political economy of food is moralized to varying degrees *and in various ways* and how ostensibly moral economies such as Fair Trade are underpinned by – and may inadvertently reproduce – the kind of structured inequalities that are associated with conventional (capitalist) political economies of food.²

The paper also brings together several recent debates in the agri-food literature. In the first instance, it seeks to add to the growing body of work that addresses the complex interconnections between the production and consumption of food rather than treating these processes as separate 'moments'. Since Goodman and DuPuis (2002) called for agri-food scholars to bridge the production–consumption divide, there have been many such attempts, drawing on a range of approaches and conceptualizations from commodity chains and circuits to more complex networks and assemblages (for an overview, see Pritchard, 2013). The paper also adds to recent work on the more-than-human dimensions of contemporary agri-food systems, emphasizing the role of humans *and* non-humans in the production and consumption of food. Within human geography, these ideas have been advanced by Whatmore (2002) and others whose work we draw on to enrich our analysis of moral economies of Fair Trade banana networks.³ Such work also emphasizes the materiality of specific foods such as bananas in actively shaping the networks through which their production and consumption is realized in practice.

The first part of this paper provides an overview of the moral foundations of the Fair Trade movement. We argue that the moral

economy of Fair Trade resembles earlier projects in Britain that sought to connect commerce with care, as it positions people in the Global South as producers in relation to ethically 'responsible' consumers in the Global North. We then compare the moral framework of Fair Trade as a set of norms and practices with the lived experiences of banana farmers in St Vincent and the Grenadines (part of the Windward Islands in the Caribbean). After providing background information on the geographical and historical conditions that preceded the development of the Fair Trade movement in the Windward Islands, exemplified by the Fairtrade Foundation's organization of banana networks, we assess the effectiveness of these networks using qualitative data that demonstrate the human and non-human, gendered and generational implications of the institutionalization of Fairtrade banana farming in St Vincent. Using Nancy Fraser's work, we argue that Fair Trade networks are not entirely effective in scaling-up Fair Trade's moral economy since the ways its institutions and standards have been implemented in St Vincent and the Grenadines perpetuate the historical *non-recognition* of local norms and non-producer positionalities.

In order to assess the effectiveness of Fairtrade markets, standards, and moralities for Caribbean banana farmers, we use empirical data that focuses on the Fairtrade networks within which they operate. During January 2010, Wilson and her colleague, Wendy-Ann Isaac (a crop scientist), conducted a series of interviews with nearly 20 Fairtrade banana farmers in St Vincent. These were mostly women, and were selected via a snowball sampling method from a total of around 200 Fairtrade certified farmers in St Vincent (who are also mostly women, as detailed in Part II, below). Interviews were also conducted with other key stakeholders in the Windward Island Fairtrade banana industry, including the president of the Windward Island Farmers Association (WINFA) and officials from the Port Authority of St Vincent and the Grenadines. Accompanied by Isaac, Wilson participated in the day-to-day activities of banana farmers and attended a meeting hosted by the Langley Park Fairtrade Group.

2. Moral economies of commerce and care

[M]orality is a geographical [and historical] result, in the sense that it arises in distinctive and changing geographical circumstances. This refers not only to the particular local conditions in which moral codes become an integral part of a people's culture or way of life but also to the spatial relationships with other peoples which have bearing on how they are understood, represented, and regarded as possible subjects of moral responsibility. [Smith, 1998: 17]

Before turning to our case study of Fairtrade bananas, we focus in more detail on the concept of moral economy itself, as it developed in Britain in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We do this to show how more recent ideas of moral economy relate to the development of the Fair Trade movement in the United Kingdom. This discussion leads us to possible historical and geographical precedents for Fair Trade's moral economy, which may impede the recognition of Vincentian Fairtrade farmers' concerns, experiences, and social norms in Fairtrade banana networks.

Like many of the key words and phrases in contemporary food studies, 'moral economy' has a complex and contested history (cf. Jackson, 2013). While the term can be traced back to the work of Adam Smith and other political theorists from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, its most prominent modern exponent was the British social historian E P Thompson. Thompson defined the moral economy as a social state in which 'community membership supersedes price as a basis of entitlement' (Thompson, 1993 [1971]: 338, footnote 2). The term has thus typically been associated – in more or less romanticised terms – with traditional

¹ We distinguish between Fair Trade as an ideology and social movement and Fairtrade as a specific manifestation of this movement by the Fairtrade Foundation.

² For a more detailed consideration of the mutual constitution of political and moral economies, see Sayer (2000).

³ For an overview of recent work see the series of reviews on 'Geographies of food' by Cook et al. (2006, 2008, 2011).

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