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Justice for all? Material and semiotic impacts of Fair Trade craft certification

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ABSTRACT

In the last two decades, the fair trade movement has undergone significant institutional changes. From an informal network of activists and producers, it has evolved into a structured set of actors whose collective adherence to "fair" principles is guaranteed by external certification programs. Focusing on the craft sector, this paper explores the impacts of both the material practice of certification (evaluation and monitoring) and the semiotic practice of certification (product labeling). Drawing on a collaborative research experience with a craftswomen's cooperative in the Ecuadorian Andes, it argues that the material practice of certification impedes artisans' attempts to join the formal Fair Trade network, while the semiotic practice of certification limits fair trade's ability to "lift the veil" of the commodity fetish, which was one of the central goals of the original movement.

1. Introduction

In the last two decades, the fair trade movement has undergone significant institutional changes. From an informal network of activists and producers, it has evolved into a structured set of actors whose collective adherence to "fair" principles is guaranteed by external certification programs. Although these certification programs have drawn a considerable amount of academic attention, researchers have tended to focus on certification of primary commodities, some of the most common of which are coffee, bananas, and lumber (Mutersbaugh et al., 2005; Taylor, 2005; Renard, 2005; Getz and Shreck, 2006; Eden 2009). By contrast, this paper explores the impacts of certification systems in the fair trade handicraft sector. Certification is a relatively recent phenomenon in the craft sector, and has not been treated to the same academic inspection as its agricultural counterparts, particularly coffee; at the moment, it represents a significant gap in the fair trade literature.

I focus on the impacts of both the material practices of Fair Trade craft certification (evaluation and monitoring) and the semiotic practice of certification (product labeling). This distinction draws directly on Michael Goodman's (2004) theorization of Fair Trade coffee. Goodman argues that Fair Trade coffee is commodified in two distinct moments: the moment of socio-ecological production, and the moment of discursive/semiotic production. In his framework, the former moment refers to the material creation of Fair Trade food products within their specific socio-ecological contexts, while the latter moment refers to the encapsulation of these products within a complex of discourses that "surround, construct, and politicize these foods" (p. 898).[1]

Goodman's distinction can be usefully adapted to the study of certification. In a sense, certification formalizes and simplifies the simultaneous processes already inherent in the production of Fair Trade goods. The material practices of certification – evaluation and monitoring – ensure that the material conditions of Fair Trade production are maintained. The semiotic practice of certification – labeling – reduces an intricate set of Fair Trade signifiers, including discursive and visual material, into a single, recognizable logo. In a general sense, I argue that the shift to certification erects rigidities within the Fair Trade system that belie two of the movement's primary goals: to assist marginalized craftspeople and to re-embed the market in social relations (Fridell, 2004, 2007; Lyon, 2006; Raynolds, 2002). These rigidities crystallize along both the material and semiotic moments of certification, and Goodman's distinction provides a useful theoretical starting point.

Specifically, this paper argues that the material practice of certification makes it difficult for artisans to join the formal Fair Trade network, while the semiotic practice of labeling reduces the degree to which Fair Trade can claim to be "lifting the veil" on commodity fetishism. To illustrate this argument, I examine Fair Trade certification procedures and engage with the substantial bodies of literature dealing with Fair Trade, certification programs, ethical trade

[1] Although Goodman uses the words "semiotic" and "discursive" nearly interchangeably in his analysis of Fair Trade coffee, I will only use "semiotic". Certification is generally conveyed through signs and symbols rather than stories. The word "semiotic" captures the idea of communication through symbols; as such, it is better suited for a dissection of certification.

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in handicrafts, and cultural commodification. In Section 3, I also draw on my experience working collaboratively with a craftswomen's cooperative in the mountains of Imbabura, Ecuador. In the fall of 2007, *Mujeres y Medio Ambiente* (Women and the Environment; MYM) asked me to assist them in obtaining Fair Trade certification. The difficulties we encountered throughout this unsuccessful process point to several systemic problems with certification and provided the initial inspiration for the present research.

The article proceeds as follows. In Section 2, I situate my analysis of Fair Trade craft certification within other discussions of certification and ethical consumption. In Section 3, I look at the material practice of Fair Trade certification. I examine the mechanics of joining the Fair Trade network as a craft cooperative, focusing on the experience of MYM. In the fourth section, I turn my attention to the semiotic practice of certification within the Fair Trade handicraft sector, paying particular attention to the degree to which labels change the kind of "story" that fairly traded crafts can tell. I conclude by re-directing the discussion to the larger question of who counts in the production of a "fair" trade system.

Throughout this paper, I make use of both capital letters and the words "formal" and "official" to distinguish between the Fair Trade system, which is mediated by official membership or certification processes, and the fair trade movement, which might follow the same principles but has not been externally evaluated.

2. Fair Trade and certification

On the 19th of January 2004, the World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO)[2] launched the Fair Trade Organization (FTO) mark from Dharavi, an area of central Mumbai that is commonly referred to as one of the largest slums in Asia. Government officials, social activists, and movie stars were on hand to assist in the unveiling of the label, which had been printed on a giant jigsaw puzzle. The label was unveiled to the group piece by piece, as each celebrity stepped up and added a section. Finally constructed, the label showed a group of interlocking figures forming the shape of a circle with the words "Fair Trade Organization" printed underneath (WFTO, 2006).

I call attention to this moment because it marked important material and semiotic shifts within the Fair Trade craft sector. The FTO label, which recognizes organizations that adhere to the fair trade movement's standards of business transparency, fair payment for goods, and environmental sustainability, rapidly became one of the primary means by which Fair Trade crafts were identified. Although fairly traded crafts had been around for decades, the WFTO was the first to standardize and centralize a certification process. Many others have since followed suit. For example, Fair Trade USA is currently piloting an apparel and linens program, and the Fair Trade Federation offers certification-like benefits to its members, which are mostly craft importers based in the US. Still, the WFTO remains the largest craft-certifying entity in the world, due in part to the location of its headquarters in the Netherlands, the heart of the fair trade movement (Nicholls and Opal, 2005; Hira and Ferrie, 2006).

There is a growing body of literature engaged in developing a critical analysis of certification and ethical consumption, but it has tended to deal almost exclusively with Fair Trade food, organic food, and sustainable forest products (McCarthy, 2006; Renard, 2003, 2005; Levi and Linton, 2003; Getz and Shreck, 2006; Taylor, 2005; Mutersbaugh et al., 2005; Mutersbaugh, 2002, 2005; Klooster, 2005; Herman, 2010; Barham et al., 2010). Although a small group of dedicated scholars have explored the ethical production and trade of handicrafts, they have not focused explicitly on the role of certification programs in these exchanges (Littrell and Dickson, 1997, 1998, 1999; Grimes and Milgram, 2000; Page-Reeves, 1998; Scrase, 2003). The introduction of certification systems into the Fair Trade craft sector calls for a new round of analysis that situates it within the larger conversation about certification and ethical consumption. In this section, I will briefly describe the fair trade movement and its adoption of certification procedures, and will proceed to outline the relevant critiques of certification as a means of professionalizing "alternative consumption" movements, looking primarily at Fair Trade food and organic food.

As its name implies, the fair trade movement is a trade-based approach to development. It divides the world into two spheres: the North, which includes Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, and Japan and is assumed to be home to wealthier consumers, and the South, which refers to every other region of the world and is assumed to be home to poorer producers.[3] The multiple iterations of fair trade resist an easy definition; however, FINE[4] has developed the following:

> Fair Trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of marginalized producers and workers – especially in the South (FINE, 2001).

Despite its current emphasis on agricultural goods, handicrafts represent the oldest sector of the fair trade movement. In its early days, fair trade was characterized by informal networks of traveling activists who worked directly with craftspeople in the South and personally transported their goods to sell in the North in an attempt to recreate the consumer–producer bond that they believed international trade had made invisible. Another way to frame this goal – as several scholars have already done (Hudson and Hudson, 2003; Fridell, 2007; Goodman, 2004) – is to say that early fair traders were attempting to lift the veil on the commodity fetish by exposing the conditions under which the product was made. I will come back to this in Section 4.

By the end of the 1940s, these independent activists had begun to coalesce into Alternative Trade Organizations (ATOs) that together formed a trade network that ran parallel to the dominant system.[5] A few of these original ATOs are still functional today, such as Ten Thousand Villages (established in 1946) and SERRV (established in 1949), although they have undergone substantial evolutions. Ten Thousand Villages began with a single woman selling handicrafts from Puerto Rico and Jordan in Mennonite churches, and now comprises over 200 retail stores across Canada and the United States (a figure that includes both stores that bear its name and "alliance stores") (Littrell and Dickson, 1999, p. 62; Ten Thousand Villages website). SERRV (Sales Exchange for Refugee Rehabilitation and Vocation) was founded by a few members of the Church of the Brethren who decided to sell crafts made by refugees in post-WWII Europe in churches in the US. Now it sources handicrafts from across

[2] At the time, the WFTO was known as the International Fair Trade Association, or IFAT.

[3] Fair Trade literature describes Fair Trade as a partnership between the North and South, despite the obvious geographical inaccuracies of these terms, so I will continue to use them here.

[4] FINE is an informal coalition of the four main Fair Trade umbrella organizations: FLO (Fair Trade Labeling Organizations), WFTO (World Fair Trade Organization; formally the International Fair Trade Association), NEWS (Network European Worldshops), and EFTA (European Fair Trade Association).

[5] "Alternative Trade Organization" is a clumsy designator in that it can refer to an export, import, and/or retail organization of any size. This includes, among others: organizations in the South that export products to retail outlets in the North; large-scale organizations such as Ten Thousand Villages that work along every point of the commodity chain; and individual outlet stores that import crafts from a variety of cooperatives and other ATOs. The only nodes of the commodity chain are never referred to as ATOs in the Fair Trade literature are producers and consumers. Put simply, ATOs refer to ethical intermediaries of all varieties.