



Virtual moralities: The mainstreaming of Fairtrade in Kenyan tea fields

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ABSTRACT

Fairtrade was founded to alleviate poverty and economic injustice through a market-based form of solidarity exchange. Yet with the increasing participation of transnational food corporations in Fairtrade sourcing, new questions are emerging on the extent to which the model offers an alternative to the inimical tendencies of neoliberalism. Drawing on a qualitative research project of Kenyan Fairtrade tea, this paper examines how the process of corporate mainstreaming influences the structure and outcomes of Fairtrade, and specifically the challenges it poses for the realization of Fairtrade's development aspirations. It argues firstly that whilst tea producers have experienced tangible benefits from Fairtrade's social premium, these development 'gifts' have been conferred through processes marked less by collaboration and consent than by patronage and exclusion. These contradictions are often glossed by the symbolic force of Fairtrade's key tenets – empowerment, participation, and justice – which simultaneously serve to neutralize critique and mystify the functions that Fairtrade performs for the political economy of development and neoliberalism. Second, building on recent critiques of corporate social responsibility, the paper explores how certain neoliberal rationalities are emboldened through Fairtrade, as a process of mainstreaming installs new metrics of governance (standards, certification, participation) that are at once moral and technocratic, voluntary and coercive, and inclusionary and marginalizing. The paper concludes that these technologies have divested exchange of mutuality, as the totemic features of neoliberal regulation – standards, procedures and protocols – increasingly render north south partnerships ever more virtual and depoliticized.

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"[N]o word captures the hopes and ambitions of Africa's leaders, its educated populations, and many of its farmers and workers in the post-war decades better than development" (Cooper, 2002, p. 91).

1. Introduction

This year Oxford's posh Marks and Spencer supermarket is commemorating Fairtrade fortnight through an evocative set of images conveying the global kinship and social transformation afforded through 'ethical consumption'.¹ As I stroll through the aisles alongside some of Britain's most privileged consumers, I encounter poignant vignettes of men and women whose lives have been uplifted by the contents of my shopping basket. "Buying tea carrying the Fairtrade mark" one poster tells me "means that farmers like Alice are getting a better deal. The Fairtrade Premiums have enabled her

local community in Kenya to extend their dispensary and set up a training centre for workers."

At one level, the branding of producers like Alice has become the leitmotif of Fairtrade² marketing, as Third World imaginaries impel British consumers toward new consumption practices and idealized social relations. These narrative frames both celebrate and authenticate the market as a means of development, one that addresses poverty and social injustice through the everyday shopping of individuals whilst ensuring the structure of capitalism remains intact. At another level, the embrace of Fairtrade by global supermarkets and celebrity icons speaks directly to the changing complexion of fairtrade, as the informational politics, commodity stories and regulatory accoutrements of 'mainstreaming' render north south partnerships ever more virtual and depoliticized.

This privatization of development and the socio-technical arrangements it entails is the focus of this paper. Drawing on a

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¹ Fairtrade Fortnight is an annual campaign to raise awareness of Fairtrade in the UK through events (e.g. coffees, banquets, fashion shows and games) that showcase Fairtrade items (www.mrdf.org.uk/assets/downloads/Resource%20Room%2008%20Church%20Guide%20Insert.pdf).

² This paper uses the term 'Fairtrade' to refer to the system of labeling and certification administered by the Fairtrade Labelling Organizations (FLO) and the term 'fairtrade' to denote the broader fairtrade movement, goods labeled with the FTO Mark of the International Fairtrade Association (IFAT, recently renamed as the World Fairtrade Organization), as well as unlabelled goods (Eliot 2004). Details of the FLO and IFAT systems can be found at www.fairtrade.net and <http://www.ifat.org>, respectively.

qualitative research project of Kenyan Fairtrade tea, I pursue two lines of inquiry.³ First, I delineate how the process of mainstreaming effects the structure and outcomes of the Aruka⁴ Fairtrade tea scheme, focusing specifically on the processes through which economic empowerment and democratic participation are enacted. I argue that whilst the communities of Aruka have experienced salutary benefits from Fairtrade's social premium, the processes through which these development 'gifts' are conferred are marked less by collaboration and consent than by patronage and exclusion. By rendering these processes visible, the paper shows how the discourses and practices of mainstreaming are rendering fairtrade an evermore opaque experience for Kenyan producers.

Second, building on recent critiques of nongovernment organizations (NGOs) (Hearn, 2001, 2007; Petras, 1999; Manji and O'Coill, 2002; Hulme and Edwards, 1997), and especially corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Blowfield and Frynas, 2005; Blowfield and Dolan, 2008; Rajak, 2007), the paper explores how certain neoliberal⁵ rationalities are emboldened through Fairtrade, as a process of mainstreaming installs new metrics of governance (standards, certification, participation) that are at once moral and technocratic, voluntary and coercive, and inclusionary and marginalizing. These contradictions, I argue, are often glossed by the symbolic force of fairtrade's assumed benevolence and the quixotic appeal of its key tenets – empowerment, participation, and justice – which simultaneously serve to neutralize critique and mystify the functions that fairtrade performs for the political economy of development and neoliberalism. Thus, whilst the moral imaginaries circulated through producers like Alice elicit our care for distant communities, Fairtrade reworks rather than transforms the politics of development, strengthening particular norms of neoliberalism whilst tempering its destructive tendencies.

1.1. Constructing development

For over a decade scholars have grappled with the meanings and practices through which 'development' is enacted, conceptualizing it variously as a socially constituted discourse (Cowen and Shenton, 1996; Cooper and Packard, 1997; Escobar, 1995; Gardner and Lewis, 1996; Crush, 1995); a set of policies and programmes associated with international development agencies (Ferguson, 1994; Elyachar, 2002; Crewe and Harrison, 1998); and a historical process of managed social change (Mitchell, 2002; Scott, 1998). Whilst this work has problematised the development question differently it has nonetheless drawn attention to the "endoconsistency" of power that inhabits its multiplicity of forms (Escobar, 1995) and the troubled legacy of its unintended consequences. Arguably among the most influential of such critiques were advanced by Arturo Escobar (1995) and James Ferguson (1994), who drew on Foucauldian notions of discourse to analyze how 'development' operates as a hegemonic structure of knowledge that frames the possibilities of "what can be thought and said within the spaces which only it can define" (Bassett, 2001, p. 5). Escobar, for example, described how the "Third World" has been produced by development discourses so pervasive that they not only facilitate the gov-

ernance of distant spaces and peoples, but render it impossible for development's architects and beneficiaries to conceptualize the world in other terms (Everett, 1997). The capacity of development to define and manage communities was also documented in Ferguson's study of integrated rural development in Lesotho, where outside 'experts' constructed "Lesotho as a particular kind of object of knowledge," a knowledge that legitimized new technologies and programs in the name of social improvement (1994, p. xiv).

One of the most enduring insights to emerge from these critiques is the way that development, whilst intensifying the exercise of institutional power, functions to simultaneously denude "politics from even the most sensitive political operations" (Ferguson, 1994, p. 256). As Ferguson (1994) notes, one way this depoliticizing effect occurs is by reducing complex social, cultural and economic factors to technical 'problems' that are divested of moral ambivalence and social context. This process finds its contemporary expression in the sphere of CSR where regimes of accountability – standards, codes and audits – are instituted as a universal, technical, and neutral solution to untoward labor conditions, removing the social relations and political economy that underwrite such conditions from consideration (Rajak, 2007; Blowfield and Dolan, 2008). In the same vein, the discourses of 'empowerment', 'participation' and 'partnership' that mark the inclusionary liberalism of fairtrade (Hart, 2004; Porter and Craig, 2004) tend to mystify issues of 'context and power' (Harriss, 2002, p. 12) and thereby neutralize the fundamentally politicized field of development. In this way fairtrade mirrors the wider neoliberal project in which economic processes are abstracted and unmoored from social and political contexts (Carrier and Miller, 1998; Miller, 1998).

For the most part, however, the relationship between fairtrade and the social relations of development has eluded close scrutiny. Although fairtrade's impact on poverty alleviation (Raynolds, 2002a,b; Murray et al., 2003; Ronchi, 2002; Bassett, 2007; Lyon, 2002; Bacon, 2005) and the representational politics associated with the marketing of 'Third World' producers on fairtrade packaging has attracted scholarly attention (Wright, 2004; Goodman, 2004; Dolan, 2007), there has been little empirical engagement with how fairtrade, as a set of situated social institutions and practices, emulates and sustains longstanding development agendas and knowledge systems. Since its beginnings, however, fairtrade has not only been inseparable from the episteme and trajectory of development (state to market-led approaches) but has come to define its 21st century form, one that aspires to redraw the contours of north south relations through the medium of the market.

1.2. The corporatization of Fairtrade

Born from the vision of faith-based and secular international relief agencies, fairtrade emerged in the UK as 'charity trade' to provide emergency relief for WWII refugees and later to engage in handicrafts importation as a way to support marginalized producers and workers in 'developing' countries (Low and Davenport, 2005; Barrat-Brown, 1993). Whilst originally forged as a mechanism for humanitarian assistance, by the 1960s the fairtrade movement had shifted its orientation toward a structural reform of capitalism and the attendant injustices in north south trade. Recasting its mandate for development as 'justice instead of charity', fairtrade shed its philanthropic associations and pursued international market regulation and direct exchange (i.e. dedicated producers and consumers) as the means and ends of its new development strategy (Schmelzer, 2007; Scholte, 2003).

During the 1980s the transformative aims of the movement were frustrated by a deepening of neoliberal economic policies (e.g. erosion of market regulation and decline in capital controls) that rendered a radical overhaul of the global economic system

³ This was a multi-sited study of the socio-economic implications of Fairtrade conducted from 2005 to 2007. In Kenya the research consisted of 252 semi-structured interviews (SSIs) with smallholders, 52 SSIs with wage employees in the processing factory, 12 participatory focus group discussions, 43 in-depth interviews with smallholders, and over 50 'key informant' stakeholder interviews. In the UK it comprised 40 in-depth interviews with Fairtrade consumers and NGOs.

⁴ Because of media controversy surrounding previous research in this area, I have chosen to use the pseudonym Aruka.

⁵ Here I am employing the concept of neoliberalism to refer to a set of practices including: trade liberalization; deregulation; the penetration of market mechanisms into non-marketized domains (e.g. health, education); and a culture of responsibility and individualism (Walker et al., 2008).

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