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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 the effectiveness of this strategy in populist support for an economy based upon independent family producers trying to secure livelihoods in impersonal and exploitative global commodity markets. Unfortunately, the attempt by fair trade to personalise economic relationships between coffee producers and consumers diverts attention away from the political economy of coffee production. Documenting the role of landless labourers, women, and migrant harvesters from Nicaragua, reveals differentiation and tensions in a rural Costa Rican 'smallholder' coffee economy that has supplied fair trade markets since the 1980s. The paper concludes that to retain credibility a politicised fair trade movement must take account of production processes and power relations at a local and regional level.

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 unmask 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 the membership that Coopeldos maintains with a second level cooperative, known as Coocafé. Interviews with managers of other cooperatives in this group, as well as with functionaries of Coocafé itself, and supplementary archival research, showed how these administrators actively pursue niche markets, and project a particular image of their members as marginal, small-holding, family farmers, to good effect (Luetchford, 2006).

The first section of the paper examines how the social relations of coffee production remain hidden in popular representations and policy initiatives. It points to the invisibility of migrants, the power of a particular social model in Costa Rica, and the popular cultural appeal of peasant economies in western culture, which fair trade draws upon. The marketing of the small farmer in fair trade markets is exemplified by packaging and data drawn from websites. The second section looks at the coffee harvest, specifically in relation to labour issues. This then provides the background for the requirement for migrant labour, and the conditions that conspire to make their marginality a prerequisite for successful engagement with coffee commodity markets.

The analysis is informed by political economy and the inherent instability of capitalism, occasioned by the requirement for profit and relentless economic growth. One way to avoid crisis is to stimulate consumer demand to soak up excess production, hence the call to spend out of recession (Harvey, 2003, p. 139). In business terms, crisis can also be averted by generating extra profit through monopoly rent; achieved by advertising qualities, such as fair trade, organic, and smallholder production, and converting them into quantities, measured in money (Harvey, 2001).¹ By this means qualities imbued in commodities by specific production practices are used further down the chain by exporters, industrialists and retailers to turn a profit (Daviron and Ponte, 2005).

Following the chain in the other direction – towards production – there is another avenue to avert crisis through exploitation that is missed by analyses that concentrate on how economic value is drawn off down the global commodity chains (Daviron and Ponte 2005), namely 'accumulation by dispossession' in the production process itself (Harvey, 2003). By this argument, capitalism can only expand and find stability by drawing on

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 interested in labour issues and power in coffee

economies (Ortiz, 1999; Paige, 1997; Roseberry, Gudmundson & Samper Kutschbach, 1995; Williams, 1994; Winson, 1989). There may be good reasons for this, apart from lack of ethnographic data.

Firstly, there are methodological issues. Landless people, women harvesters, and migrants in particular, constitute the most marginalized and invisible part of the coffee sector. Interviews with landless residents and women were carried out, but they were often less forthcoming or harder to find than the more voluble landowners. Such difficulties were multiplied in the case of seasonal visitors. Although I held conversations with Nicaraguan migrants during chance encounters in the field, their peripatetic existence and informal status made systematic data collection difficult. For the most part they disappear into the hills and trees as mysteriously as they melt over the national border. As the paper will show, migrant harvesters are elusive, partly because this suits their purposes; they often have no papers and follow work opportunities as and when they arise. On the other hand, they are forced into this position by their lack of official representation, and the determination of the state to deny them legal status and employment. Their very marginality makes it difficult for them to exert any kind of political leverage.

Secondly, landlessness, and reliance on migrant labour, contradicts the central place afforded to the small landowning farmer in Costa Rican national identity. A dominant tradition in national life places great weight upon the idea of the yeoman farmer (Monge, 1980; Rodriguez, 1993; Seligson, 1980); self-sufficient and independent, living in dispersed settlements, utilising simple technology on privately owned plots of land, and involved in limited local markets. This version of history is often associated with the work of Carlos Monge Alfaro (1980), who argues that the distinctive democratic institutions and political culture, for which the country is renowned, emerged out of a rural democracy of shared isolation and poverty:

Thus, virtually without precedent, the yeoman farmer emerged, an orphan, the son of no one. He was endowed with autonomy and freedom, the freedom of a man born in the mountains who has lived without dependence on authorities and social obligations. His modest and rustic life was dominated by the desperate struggle to subsist, producing in the descendants of the conquistadors a

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 be farming less than 2 hectares of coffee. At the other end of the scale, less than ten per cent appear to farm the ten hectares deemed necessary by the national coffee institute (Icafé) to support a family (Cubero, 1998) Table 1

Missing in these figures is the tendency for farmers to have multiple and diverse sources of income, and to constantly “juggle” between different ways of making a living (Luetchford, 2007). More specifically, the common strategy for larger landowners to mix coffee farming with beef and dairy herds is hidden. Although data on land ownership for farmers in the Coocafé cooperatives was not available, Table 2 shows that many, though not all coffee growers in El Dos and Campos de Oro, have significant landholdings. This kind of differentiation is obscured by the model of the generic, small coffee-farming specialist projected in the fair trade media. Table 2

Although my ethnography is on Costa Rica, and migrant labour, the more general point is that fair trade focuses upon small farmers and families, and is likely to obscure and so fetishise the conditions of production in any economy. What is advertised on merchandise is a particular vision of the world in which production is linked to consumption, and producers to consumers, in an effort to deny the exploitation embodied in the commodity form. A broad range of issues and agendas are pursued in published materials, campaigns, merchandising, and

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 socialist undertones, and conjures up the independent, self-determining businessperson.

Second, although they are landowners, small farmers are also labourers who produce directly by working the earth, which appeals to the left. Third, and most complex, small farmers hold a cultural association with a specific social order. As in the Costa Rican case detailed above, the independence of peasant existence implies formal equality, based upon common status as owners of productive land. What is more, production from the land suggests localism, a world in which reproduction is based upon social ties within and between families. Either families exchange what they need, or they directly consume what they produce and so guarantee their own subsistence. In both cases needs are satisfied through direct and known personal relationships, either through families, or with their land; in this way people are imagined to enter unalienated relations with the means of production, with their product, and with other people. Fourthly, there is a more political message that lies behind this; namely, that consumers can reach out to, and support, forms of social and economic organization that are geared towards procuring livelihoods, rather than generating profits.

By linking to ideas such as these, which hold a cultural association with peasant forms, political movements draw popular support from across the political spectrum (Guthman, 2004; Kearney, 1996; Pratt, 2003). Using Marxian terminology, and at an analytical level, we might assert that the idea of peasant production conjures up a society in which exchange value is not extracted by unknown intermediaries; instead, people generate, reproduce and relate to one another through the production and consumption of use values. Rather than exchanging things for profit, the economy and exchange can be imagined as furnishing necessities, and therefore guaranteeing livelihoods. The idea of use value provides, for Marx at least, an idealized avenue to escape the distortions and extortions of capitalist exchange.⁹

In localized circuits we discover the advantages of the artisan mode of production; peasants own their labour power, they control the means of production, and since we can imagine local and immediate exchange relations (such as self-provisioning from nature) we glimpse through them a world in which producers control the distribution of their product, and do so not to maximize profits but to distribute the necessities of life (Baudrillard, 1975, pp. 96-97). It seems reasonable to assume that food is the prime example of human necessity that must be satisfied. If the attractions of the artisan class lie in their capacity to capture the full value of what is created, then fair trade foods are an avenue to

think this possibility through. Tellingly, as consumers, we realize use value in its totality at the moment of consumption. Not for nothing are the most successful fair trade products flavoursome stimulants such as tea, coffee, honey and chocolate; they enliven our senses, allow us to momentarily escape alienation and realize ourselves, as we consume use value as pure pleasure (Stewart, 2005).¹⁰

The above observations are intended as a contribution to further understanding of cultural factors driving fair trade. But what of the more political agenda, which seeks trade justice for exploited, marginalized, small farmers? My aim is to show what the model obscures, not celebrate it, and trade justice campaigns are in danger of being complicit in this obfuscation as and when they reproduce the smallholder model. If independent family producers denote rural equality, to interrogate this requires knowledge of the political economy of coffee production. The generic small farmer is useful since it provides an appealing and idealized motif for fair trade. On the other hand it hides differences in landholdings, masks the range of livelihood strategies different people engage in, and, as documented here, leaves no room for the labour process in coffee economies. This includes understanding the way labour is mobilized and organized, tensions and uncertainties between different interests, the opportunities and constraints people face, and the strategies they employ. Although the data refers to one particular place, the problem is due to the nature of the crop, and I surmise similar conditions and contradictions will hold in many if not all 'smallholder' coffee economies.

The coffee harvest

In the commercial coffee industry, the problem of labour over the harvest months sets up a series of problems specific to the industry, yet many writers seem to miss, or have ignored this aspect.¹¹ The technification of production, which in the Tilarán Highlands is attributed to the activities of the cooperative and traced back over the last 30 years, means more coffee to be picked. But increased production has, according to evidence and common testimony, coincided with a trend towards smaller families. The average number of children in a family today is two or three, whilst it is common for older residents to have had ten or 15 siblings, all of whom could have laboured in the harvest.

Although the precise timing and type of interventions varies from farmer to farmer and year to year, coffee growing is specifically tied to an

annual cycle, with tasks associated with, and prescribed for certain months. The flowering and the fruiting of the bushes, and the rains that accelerate weed growth, dictate the rhythm of production. The harvest is a crucial time. It is when farmers learn how much coffee they have, which gives an indication of potential income, and allows them to compare with previous years and assess their attempts to negotiate the intricacies of production. It is also critical for social relations of production. Since even very small farmers, with only a hectare or two, struggle to manage the entire harvest using family labour, hired workers must be bought in. After the harvest the pruning is carried out, usually by the owner but sometimes with one or two paid assistants. In the dry summer months from March to July the bushes flower and begin to bud, less work is required, and farmers generally manage without wage labour. This is a time for maintenance work, socialising, and recuperation in preparation for the intense activity of the next harvest.

The tempo of ripening of the fruit is dependent on antecedent blossoming. Coffee comes into bloom repeatedly, and with escalating and then decreasing intensity, and each florescence produces buds that will eventually turn to fruit that contains the bean. The frequency and profusion of the flowerings therefore prefigure the timing and intensity of work in the harvest. Bushes producing many flowers at once will later have larger quantities of ripe fruit appearing at one time. Conversely, frequent flowerings spread over a longer period will require repeat visits to the grove (or *cafetal*), but provide poorer pickings on each visit. By such criteria harvesters characterise coffee as 'bad' or 'good', a judgement that refers to how much ripe fruit appears simultaneously, and so how quickly they can fill their baskets.

The pattern varies from year to year, but maturation is partly dependent on environmental and climatic conditions. In one area, El Dos, up to eight flowerings occur, which farmers say relates to the cooler, wetter climate, as the occasional and unseasonable rain showers in the dry season encourages blooming. On the hills to the south east in Campos de Oro, where it is hotter and drier, the coffee tends to flower more intensively over a shorter period, and so reaches maturity slightly later, but in greater abundance at one time. Farmers say the coffee here is 'more level' or 'even'. Meanwhile, away to the east, at higher altitude, the fruit ripens even later, and the season continues long after producers in El Dos have finished picking.¹² These broad differences in climate mask

more subtle variations in light and shade, exposure and shelter; cropping varies between neighbouring *cafetales*, between rows in the same field, and even between adjoining bushes. In addition to the influence of climate and position several farmers observed that coffee in a well-worked *cafetal* ripens more slowly than one in which the plants are insufficiently nourished or infrequently pruned. Stressed bushes flower and fruit more quickly and old wood is less productive, so labour requirements at harvest depend upon previous inputs and agricultural practices.

Physical conditions, primarily altitude and temperature, therefore engender different labour requirements, which correspond in part to zones of production. In addition, a well tended, productive grove normally contains more coffee to pick. The variables behind the timing and size of the crop present pickers with a range of work options; when the season has ended in one area it is peaking in another part of the highlands, and harvesters can take the opportunity to migrate.

The owner of the *cafetal* takes decisions about when and where to pick, depending on the amount of ripe red cherries on the bush. Although this is not of concern from a financial point of view, because pickers are paid piecework, it is vital in attracting harvesters and keeping them; the better the picking, the more workers earn. A farmer who sets a team to work on a poor patch will soon see the labour force dwindle, as they move away to richer fields. In the early part of the harvest little or no help is required, but as the season gathers pace the farmer must be able to attract and retain a workforce. Personal judgment is exercised to assess how many labourers will be needed at a particular time. But landowners must also develop a reputation for providing good pay and conditions to workers in order to secure them in the first place.

The picking season extends over a lengthy period, roughly from September to February, but peaks in the middle months.¹³ Whilst the majority of farmers manage with family labour outside of the harvest, thereby reducing costs and ensuring more of the value remains within the house, almost all require some help to gather the coffee. In the early part of the harvest the landowner's family and local residents can generally fulfil labour needs, but the ability to attract workers becomes increasingly crucial as the season gathers pace. As it peaks, local, landless and land-poor resident labour is supplemented with migrant workers.

The first group of landless residents generally have long-standing work agreements with a particular

patrón, and so the structure of work is part of wider social relationships. The number of landless locals varies from place to place, but it also fluctuates; those who own no land or house have a transitory life style. They are residents who may best be described as semi-permanent; they move frequently, but often only short distances, from house to house within the locality, as they attach themselves to a different *patrón*. Both women and men pick; it is one agricultural task that is considered particularly suitable for women, as manual dexterity rather than strength is required. A report prepared for the Ministry of Education by the school in El Dos records 44 per cent of women residents pick coffee; a significant contribution in an area where the majority of farmers work dairies. Children are also sometimes kept out of school to help at this crucial time. If the family own the *cafetal* the husband may 'send' his wife, daughter and other female relatives to pick, whilst he oversees the work and undertakes the heavy task of transferring the sacks of picked coffee from grove to cooperative, or the nearest collection point. Payment to family members for picking is open to negotiation, depending on the relationship and whether they still live in the parental home. Some families pay relatives to come and work, whilst extended families sometimes avoid employment costs by working as a group, exchanging labour, and moving from one grove to another. This system of labour exchange is said by residents to have once been more prevalent. It is a particularly satisfactory resolution of the labour problem since it avoids cash payments and obviates the need to rely on outsiders.

The harvest is a key time for landless locals; they must earn as much as possible to tide them over the remaining five months of the year, when less work is available. The ability to find employment during the rest of the year depends on personal ties and reputation, particularly the capacity to work hard. Occasional work may be found in pruning coffee bushes or applying fertiliser, in clearing land, or as a *peón* in a dairy. Promising to help in a future harvest is a useful point of leverage for gaining employment during leaner times. If little demand for labour puts workers at a disadvantage in the dry summer months, then during the harvest the tables are turned and pickers have an upper hand; as formally free agents they can move from one grove to another. Because picking conditions and requirements vary, and agreements are made on a day-to-day basis, there is room for manoeuvre. One picker refused to work a particular grove, even though he was employed on a daily basis in the

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 (*jerdo*) 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 and apparently contradictory views are often voiced by the same person.

On the negative side, Nicaraguans stand accused of being unreliable and untrustworthy. When they begin work, verbal agreements are made and they are provided with shelter, usually a wooden shack, which is generally purpose built to house harvesters. In return they are expected to pick for the provider of the lodgings, as and when they are needed. In slack periods, between pickings, they are at liberty to work elsewhere. However, since they do not intend to remain after the harvest, when work is scarce, they have little incentive to keep these agreements, and in practice tend to follow the harvest as it peaks in different places. One farmer was incensed at a group of Nicaraguans. He had collected them from town and given them accommodation, only to see them leave after five days to work on the other side of the valley where the picking was purported to be better. Compounding the problem of the Nicaraguan is their perceived association with barbarity and danger. Traits easily juxtaposed to the qualities of peace, harmony, tolerance and temperance claimed by resident *ticos*. To a degree the propensity towards violence is attributed to the war, whilst in part it is claimed that those who come from Nicaragua are the criminal element on the run from the law in their own country. Others say that violence is a result of drunkenness; although some locals do drink, alcohol is generally viewed in a negative light, and the Protestant converts (*evangelicos*) are strong advocates of temperance. A number of brawls and machete fights occurred outside the village bar, and sometimes involved confrontations between guest workers and local youths. Whatever the cause, stories abound of *nica* involvement in violent clashes and deeds, and they are generally feared and avoided. Many women will not walk out alone if they know Nicaraguans are in

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 one family involved in milk and beef production, but could potentially supply a livelihood for ten coffee farmers and their families. Largely unquestioned in this representation are structures of power. The yeoman model, with low intensity methods and returns per hectare, and large family units for satisfying labour needs is complicit in this. The cultural and romantic association of peasant modes of production diverts attention away from obvious inequalities between parties with different interests and capacities (Stolcke, 1995). To be specific, what is obscured in this representation of the coffee industry, small farming families, the cooperative, and, by extension, fair trade, are inequalities between landed, land poor and landless, women and men, residents and migrants.

A number of points are forthcoming. Firstly, looking at the organization of production, and specifically the harvest, shows our assumptions about 'small farmer' economies to be false. Farming families are frequently forced to rely on external labour as their own is not sufficient. What is more, often small farmers with little land work for others as pickers to earn extra cash. In this way synthetic categories break down and imagined communities of independent family producers melt into air. Secondly, we need to understand how our cultural

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.maketrade.org/en/index.php?file=issues_coffee.html (accessed 25/06/07)

⁵ The emphasis on small farmers is made more prominent in some accounts, and in relation to specific industries (bananas, coffee, and cocoa). Other products and websites are more concerned with labour issues and plantation workers (cut flowers and tea). For examples of the representation of small farmers in coffee see http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/suppliers_growers (accessed 15/03/07) and <http://www.fairtrade.net/producers.html> (accessed 15/03/07)

⁶ My translation from the French: “Arabica issu de la culture des petits producteurs”.

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http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/suppliers_growers_coffee_isabel.htm

⁸

http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/suppliers_growers_coffee_three_men.htm

⁹ Marx gives three examples of unalienated labour, though he rejects them all. Firstly, Robinson Crusoe is taken by Marx as representative of the total realisation of use value, since he produces everything he needs himself, so that “the relations between Robinson and the

objects that form the wealth of his own creation, are here so simple and clear as to be intelligible without exertion...yet those relations contain all that is essential to the determination of value” (2000:477). Yet Marx recognises that the problem with Crusoe is that he is alone on his island and is not properly social. He consequently turns to feudal society. Marx contrasts this with capitalism, not because it was non-exploitative, but because “the social relations of individuals in performance of their labour appear at all events as their own mutual personal relations, and are not disguised under the shape of social relations between the products of labour” (2000:477). That is, goods are not fetishised, and economic relations are first and foremost social relations, albeit of an exploitative kind. The third case is the peasant household, which Marx objected to because he saw it as patriarchal, historically regressive and inefficient, and he rejected ownership of personal private property since under capitalism it presupposes and results in the alienation of labour from the product. However, he does recognise that peasant production as a social relation is a function of the family; individual labour power is part of the overall labour power of the group, and so its social character is stamped upon it (*ibid.*).

¹⁰ This section draws upon Baudrillard’s insight that “the moment of consumption remains of the artisan type even in the system of our political economy. The user who consumes enters into personal relationship with the product and directly recovers its “use value,” just as the process of artisan labour preserves the use value of the labour power of the artisan. But this personal exchange in consumption is restricted for us to the level of the privatized individual. This also remains the only moment that seems to avoid exchange value, hence it is invested today with a very strong psychological and social charge” (1975, note 2).

¹¹ With the notable exception is Ortiz (1999). Many of the arguments central this chapter, such as attitudes to migrants, surveillance and quality control, and power differentials in bargaining over wages and conditions, are to be found in this detailed work on rural labour markets and the coffee industry in Colombia.

¹² The peaking of the harvest in different areas at different times around Coopeldos was initially explained by growers, but was later checked against Cooperative records of coffee received from different areas over the season. (See ‘Coopeldos R.L. Departamento de Contabilidad. Sistema de Control de Recibo de Café; medidas y remedidas por fecha, 1999’).

¹³ As in note 5, above, the harvest pattern is revealed by the cooperative’s records for coffee delivered to reception points (*recibidores*) in each zone of production (Sistema de control de recibo de café, medidas y remedidas por fecha, Departamento de Contabilidad, Coopeldos R.L.)

¹⁴ Estimates at the number of Nicaraguans in Costa Rica vary, but most put the number at around 500,000, about half of whom are classified as illegal (see Tico Times, October 9th, 1998, p. 4)

¹⁵ This figure will include some members who no longer produce coffee, and, more importantly, families with more than one member inscribed in the cooperative.

¹⁶ The term *nica* is not necessarily pejorative; it may be compared to the equivalent term *tico*, which Costa Ricans use as a form of self-identification. The name *paisa*, which is also used with reference to Nicaraguans, has more negative connotations.

¹⁷ By one estimate coffee production requires 130 days labour per hectare, per year, while cattle requires only six (Evans, 1999, p. 47).

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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).

Activity	El Dos		Campos de Oro	
	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.

**Again, this result is distorted by 2 large landowners with more than 200 hectares