

COFFEE AS A GLOBAL METAPHOR

Daniel Reichman

I have been asked to discuss the significance of my current research on coffee production in Honduras to an interdisciplinary view of the role of coffee in the world. Like many anthropologists, I study the emergence of global culture. Whereas anthropologists once focused on the differences that existed among the world's cultures, we now focus *just as much* on the processes that connect the peoples of the world into a single social system—such as global trade, migration, tourism, the media, and international religious movements. It's not that anthropologists have abandoned the remote jungle village for the global village; rather, we try to understand how different human groups experience the realities of globalization in ways that are shaped by unique cultural situations. The key problem that drives much of the anthropology of globalization is this: How can we understand culture and society in global terms when human behavior is shaped by the immediate relationships and everyday circumstances in which people live?

Although people are undoubtedly drawn into global webs of social connectedness, to what degree are they conscious of these

connections and to what degree do cultural explanations of one's place in the world influence actions and decisions? I have sought to understand the theories, myths, or cultural frameworks that people use to think about their place in a totality called "the global market," and how these frameworks are shaped by people's position in a division of labor. As an anthropologist, my methodology is designed to understand human behavior from the point of view of the individual actor in society. In my field research, I have focused on how people in a small coffee-growing town in Honduras have experienced and responded to globalization. What are the values and goals that ultimately guide their behavior, and how are these factors shaped by their changing involvement in the global market?

Many of the coffee farmers that I came to know during my fieldwork had either emigrated to the US or were considering doing so. I found that coffee farmers in Honduras now routinely use emigration and income earned abroad as a strategy to manage risk in the coffee market. Let me explain what I mean: The end of the International Coffee Agreement, a treaty that regulated the price of coffee for sale on the global market, in 1989, ushered in a period of wild swings in the price of coffee. Although coffee was always a volatile commodity, the ICA gave coffee growers some measure of stability by guaranteeing a

*Daniel Reichman is an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Rochester. This paper is from a presentation during the Coffee Conference held by CLAIS in October, 2007.

minimum price of \$1.29 at export.¹ Since 1990, the Honduran market has had three severe boom and bust cycles, and Honduran farmers have emigrated to the US to escape from debt, earn money for inputs like fertilizer, or they have abandoned farming altogether, selling land to pay for their passage to the US.

For example, a farmer that I met in Honduras purchased ten acres of coffee land at the peak of a boom in the late-nineties. After the bottom dropped out of the market, he had many debts to pay: He had borrowed money to purchase the land; he had purchased a new pickup truck; he owed money for fertilizer, and he ended up immigrating to Denver, Colorado, where he works in the construction industry. He used social connections with relatives from another part of the country to make his first trip in the nineties. Now, there is a community of two dozen men from this small village in and around Denver.

After two years of work, he paid off his debts, and purchased enough fertilizer to make his farm productive again. He has made two similar trips since 1999, both during periods of low coffee prices.² When making economic decisions, he must consider factors like US immigration policy and the real estate market in suburban Colorado when he considers planting coffee, hiring labor, and selling his crop. Will there

be a job waiting for him in Denver? Are the authorities cracking down on immigrant labor? Is it worth it for him to leave his wife and children behind in search of income?

The key point is that these farmers are being drawn into the global market in new ways, and their actions are shaped by cultural ideas about the meaning and direction of change. For example, the rising importance of migration has led to a radical transformation in local society, in which a productive class of coffee farmers has been largely replaced by a class of people linked to the migrant economy, such as human smugglers, returned migrants, and families with kin abroad. This has had positive effects for some groups—such as local women, who now take a more prominent role in the local economy and politics, or landless people, who have new options of upward mobility. But it has also created great confusion and alienation, as a functioning local economy is now dependent on people working in distant locales that people cannot comprehend or explain-- places like Oyster Bay, Long Island and Morristown, NJ, two major destinations for Honduran migrants. Although local people are now able to communicate with kin abroad through IP telephones, webcams, and instant messaging, they still possess only a fragmentary understanding of where migrants are and how they live. This change in socioeconomic structure leads to a cultural conflict about the meaning of this change (Is it a good or bad thing?) and this conflict is largely played out in the domains of politics and religion.

When people in this community consider and evaluate the changes in which they are caught up, their ideas are shaped by cultural norms and values. These people tend to think about justice as a social responsibility

¹ See Robert Bates *Open Economy Politics: The Political Economy of the World Coffee Trade* Princeton U Press (1997) for a detailed analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the ICA as a form of international regulation.

² This farmer was fortunate enough to receive a tourist visa to the US, which allowed unlimited re-entries within a specific time period. This was unusual—most farmers who emigrated post-1996 were undocumented.

to one's immediate kin, employees, or neighbors, or through Christian ideas of sin and moral conduct. Honduran coffee farmers rarely think about concepts like exploitation or fairness through secular political idioms, and when they do, the significant political unit is usually the family or the town, rather than the nation or the global market. The aftermath of the Cold War made rural Hondurans extremely suspicious of secular theories of social reform that might be linked to Communism, and localized definitions of justice have filled the vacuum left by the decimation of the political left in the nineteen-eighties.³ Similarly, rural Hondurans have been largely abandoned by their nation's neoliberal development strategy, and tend to have a rather weak sense of nationalism.

Honduran farmers do not see the coffee trade as fundamentally unjust or exploitative. However, they express great anger at people who violate local norms of reciprocity or neighborliness. For example, a Taiwanese-American coffee farmer in town was the target of violence, due to the widespread belief that he made a fortune exporting his coffee crop to New York City.⁴ Despite the fact this farmer paid employees the going rate and treated them as well or better than his Honduran counterparts, he came to symbolize the relationship between this town and New

York, the center of global capitalism which, not coincidentally, has also become the principle source of migrant wealth. This farmer was an outsider who did not speak Spanish well, and became a scapegoat for the systemic problems that the town faced. In this case, Hondurans are trying to come to grips with their new social relationship to distant others, but they think about this relationship in a highly alienated way.

Earlier, I mentioned that a key challenge in the study of global culture is the need to grasp how people view their place in an abstract global system. This understanding leads to a theory in which economic action that is situated in particular narratives about how the market works. I have approached this question by focusing on how different groups use coffee as a metaphor for the totality of the global market. We see evidence all around us of people trying to come to grips with their place in the world system by tracking commodities—particularly food items—through the global division of labor⁵. Tracking single commodities allows us to comprehend an abstract totality in a concrete form—a world market materialized in, for example, a coffee bean. For many consumers, a coffee bean brings an entire web of relationships into consciousness. In this sense, studies of commodities perform a twofold function—they empirically document the existing social relationships between producers and

³ See David Stoll *Is Latin America Turning Protestant* University of California Press (1992), for an early study of the political aftermath of the violence of the eighties. See Julia Paley *Marketing Democracy: Power and Social Movements in Post-Dictatorship Chile* University of California Press (2001) for a relevant comparison from Chile.

⁴ For a more detailed description of this case see, Daniel Reichman "Justice at a Price: Regulation and Alienation in the Global Coffee Trade" *Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, Spring 2008.

⁵ This point has been made most forcefully in two works by Robert J. Foster: "Tracking Globalization: Commodities and Value in Motion" In *The Sage Handbook of Material Culture*. Christopher Tilley et. al. Eds. London: Sage (2005) and *Coca-Globalization: Following Soft Drinks from New York to New Guinea* Palgrave-Macmillan (2008)

consumers *and* they present a blueprint for the redefinition and resignification of those relationships⁶.

I see this new interest in where food comes from and how it is produced as symptomatic of a central problem in global politics: How do we as a society regulate the market when our basic political unit—the nation state—has been surpassed by a global market that seems beyond the regulatory control of any government? If we cannot think of the global economy as a system with a certain underlying logic, how can the global market be regulated in the way that nation-states once regulated national economies according to certain principles of justice? By tracking commodities through space and time, we can begin to think about the incredibly complex global division of labor in which we all live. From there, we can begin to think about our role as global citizens and the possibility of political reforms.

Through a focus on particular commodities like, coffee, citizens have developed novel forms of market regulation to deal with the nation-state's inability to—for example—enforce labor standards internationally. One response has been to simplify the division of labor through the local or slow foods movements; another is to use consumer choice as a form of market regulation, as in the fair trade movement. It is important to note that none of these strategies for market regulation involves political institutions or laws, but both movements are efforts to apply certain moral principles to the global economy.

I see a parallel here between the struggles I observed in Honduras and the ways in which western consumers have tried to come to terms with their place in the global market. Coffee has provided a metaphor to think about the relationships between consumers and producers in the global economy. I view fair trade as an attempt to formulate a way of thinking about economic justice based on the social relationships formed through trade. These social relationships, however, are not created through communication or mutual interaction—but through narratives (texts perhaps) of how the world market works. These narratives are mediated by fair trade marketing materials and imagery. The politics of consumer activism are based on a particular “story” of how the global market works, which, like all narratives, foregrounds some aspects of reality and ignores others.

I think it is important to recognize that coffee is one of the only major commodities that is not produced in any of the world's most powerful capitalist countries. This allows consumers to think about the politics of the coffee trade as a relatively simple relationship between rustic, tropical farmers and cosmopolitan Western consumers. If we were to think about say, sugar or grain, we would have to venture into the thicket of US electoral politics, foreign relations, special interests, subsidies, processed food prices, the stock market, and many other variables. Whereas issues like protectionist subsidies for US grain or soy producers require one to think about the politics of nation-states in a competitive global marketplace. Coffee's story seems easy to tell—a direct relationship between producers and consumers.

⁶ See Daniel Miller *The Dialectics of Shopping* University of Chicago (2001) for an optimistic view of the political potential of commodity studies.

Earlier, I stated that a key challenge in the anthropology of globalization was the need to understand how different social groups that are connected by the economic relationships view “the system” in different ways. Similar to the Honduran villagers who direct their anger towards the Taiwanese farmer who has come to symbolize their relationship with the wider world, I see many thoughtful American consumers viewing coffee as a symbol for their own relationship with commodity producers in the developing world. This is an important development that might presage new forms of political engagement with the world outside the United States. However, it is a necessarily partial view of the global division of labor.

In a recent article, called “Against the Populist Temptation”⁷ Slavoj Žižek wrote: “For a populist...the cause of the troubles is ultimately never the system as such but the intruder who corrupted it...not a fatal flaw inscribed into the structure as such but an element that doesn’t play its role within the structure properly.” Here, Žižek is rephrasing the concept of alienation and its role in the formation of social consciousness (how one sees the world). Human beings are never completely conscious of the totality of relationships in which they act, so—by necessity—they rely on symbols that explain their place in the world (such as religions, philosophies, or stories). These symbols are often called collective representations or *alienated* social consciousness by social scientists. For example: Latin American immigrants are blamed for systemic problems in the US economy; the coffee industry is singled out as an illustrative example of the injustices of

global agro-food systems. These are partial explanations that come to symbolize larger structural problems which escape the limits of human consciousness. In Žižek’s terms, immigrants or coffee beans are the elements that do not properly play their role within the structure, which is generally taken as a given. In the simplest possible terms—symbols take the place of the whole.

By looking at how people think about the system of global trade through the lens of coffee, we can see how political behavior is shaped by stories and metaphors—cultural understandings of how the world works. As a basis for politics, I hope we can agree that if do inhabit a single global system, that system must have some guiding structure. This is why interdisciplinary conferences like this are so important. They allow us a view of the system of global coffee that is not limited by our own narrow perspectives. From there, we can begin to think about our rights and obligations to distant others to who we are linked by the exchange of mundane things like coffee beans.

⁷ *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Spring 2006): 551–74.