

## **Auditing the Subjects of Fair Trade: coffee, development, and surveillance in highland Chiapas**

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### **Abstract**

Fair trade certification is a mechanism used by coffee cooperatives to assist farmers with accessing cash income and securing a better price for their product. Third-party certifiers regulate the fair trade label, which is tied not only to price, but also to standards for production and development. In this paper I examine these standards as they are deployed in self-declared autonomous communities in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico. I argue that third-party certifiers through enforcement of standards, and surveillance attempt to create a producer subject who becomes “fixed” through certification. Drawing from fieldwork with the coffee cooperative Maya Vinic, I provide an example of how farmers negotiate larger political commitments and livelihood strategies while engaging in coffee production. Members of Maya Vinic reside in communities that have declared autonomy from the Mexican state and neoliberal market. These political commitments draw a tension into the landscape as farmers commit land and time to coffee while maintaining subsistence production. Through an examination of the annual fair trade audit, I detail this contradiction as it plays out in the highlands. I conclude that new lines of inquiry must be established that take into account place-based politics as they intersect with fair trade certification.

*Maya Vinic was not founded for earning money, but because of the conflict in the communities. Many of us had been in the cooperative of [name removed] but after 1997 there were divisions in the communities and within the cooperative and there were some who had participated in the massacre, which caused many problems. So we talked as Abejas and decided to start our own cooperative.*

Maya Vinic Member, 2012<sup>1</sup>

On December 22, 1997, Máscara Roja (Red Mask), a Mexican paramilitary group entered a church in the highland indigenous community of Acteal (Chenalhó, Chiapas) and opened fire, killing forty-five and wounding twenty-five (Moksnes 2004; Stahler-Sholk 1998). The church had been occupied by men, women, and children, members of the pacifist group Sociedad Civil Las Abejas who were participating in a mass for peace.<sup>2</sup> Many were political refugees—supporters of indigenous demands for autonomy and secure livelihoods—fleeing the violence of the low-intensity war that began following the uprising of the Zapatistas in 1994.<sup>3</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the uprising many indigenous communities in the Chiapas highlands

were declared autonomous.<sup>4</sup> For many in highland communities, autonomy represented in part the possibility of maintaining—with dignity—a subsistence way of life.<sup>5</sup> These self-declared autonomous communities are populated by indigenous Maya subsistence farmers, many of whom also grow coffee for export markets.

Although demands for indigenous autonomy are rooted in long-standing regional politics, they are also punctuated by the tensions of a neoliberal Mexico. In Chiapas, the push by the federal government to privatize community-held land (cf. Bobrow-Strain 2007) and effectively remove subsistence farmers from the countryside is an acute example of the neoliberal adjustments leading up to and following the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement. The 1994 Zapatista uprising (timed to coincide with NAFTA passing) heralded the persistence of indigenous peasant economies and the violence of neoliberalism in rural Mexico. The refusal to participate in Mexico's development plan has fundamentally changed the spaces of highland communities. Indeed, findings from fieldwork conducted in Chenalhó (see Figure 1) between 2010 and 2013 suggest that farmers supportive of autonomy must mobilize a number of different and sometimes competing strategies to resist the state and neoliberal marketplace while maintaining their way of life.

Highland communities populated by indigenous farmers have long been economically marginalized and largely ignored by the state. Yet many farmers seeking to maintain a subsistence way of life have resisted state efforts to remove them from the land. Autonomy in these communities is self-declared and is not recognized by official governments in Mexico. With this rebellious autonomy comes a deep distrust of official government entities and neoliberal capitalism. Adherents to autonomy do not recognize the official government at any level and refuse government aid. Instead, many rely on cooperatives and long-standing

community labor arrangements for leadership within self-declared autonomous communities. Farmers struggling for autonomy also limit their interaction with the marketplace, producing primarily corn, beans and squash for subsistence. However, many farmers maintain small plots of coffee to sell for cash income that allows for the purchase of items that cannot be produced at home.

In 1999, survivors of the Acteal Massacre formed their own coffee cooperative called Maya Vinic (Mayan Man), which cultivated an important network for autonomy supporters and income generation. The creation of a Las Abejas coffee cooperative, while representing the struggle of its members, was not able to insulate them from the political conflicts in highland communities nor the fluctuations of the international coffee market. Reaching out through the international solidarity network that was built by Las Abejas in the wake of the massacre, Maya Vinic leadership built ties with coffee roasting cooperatives in the United States and eventually, in 2001, secured a stable price for their coffee through fair trade certification with Fairtrade International. Attaining fair trade certification was significant for Maya Vinic, as it introduced standards for production, community development, and surveillance into self-declared autonomous communities.

In this paper I examine fair trade certification as an apparatus of development and surveillance in self-declared autonomous communities. Specifically, I consider fair trade certification as an income earning strategy that works both with and against the struggle of highland farmers. A particular set of ideas about producer and community development are attached to fair trade certification standards that are shaped by neoliberal economic imaginaries (Dolan 2010; Lyon 2011; Naylor 2014). Coffee production provides an income for subsistence producers, however, fair trade certification, operates as a development intervention and

neoliberal fix in these communities. Fair trade third-party certifiers, such as Fairtrade International claim that certification empowers producers and provides stimuli for economic and business development for *entire* communities (FLO 2011, author's emphasis). Yet, how does the enforcement of fair trade certification standards impact producers in self-declared autonomous communities that rely primarily on subsistence farming?

I consider this question by examining the experience of Maya Vinic in their annual fair trade certification audit (2013), focusing on the tensions between fair trade certification standards and self-declared autonomy. Specifically, I build on work in certification studies, which articulates certification as a new set of neoliberal power-relations that disproportionately impact producers. Scholars note that third-party certifiers, in the absence of the state assume a form of disciplinary power—or governmentality—through stipulating standards for production and development that are used to control, discipline and surveil producers (cf. Hughes 2001; Gibbon and Ponte 2008; Lyon 2011; Mutersbaugh 2005). Scholars focused explicitly on fair trade have documented this use of disciplinary power, pointing to a continual process of ‘fixing’ producers as subjects of fair trade certification (see: Nigh 2002 in Lyon 2011:152; Naylor 2014). Geographers have been particularly interested in governmentality as it relates to sovereign power over territory (Elden 2007), however, the concept remains salient here as institutions and organizations outside the state operationalize disciplinary power. Indeed, governmentality goes beyond government, extending to institutional standards that are intended to control, surveil, and improve population behavior (Foucault 1991). Such conditioning does not stem from literal control, but rather through methods that drive behavior—the ‘conduct of conduct.’ I use governmentality here, not as a way to explain how fair trade certification works, but to highlight

the ‘subjectification’ of producers as a population to be ‘fixed’ and the way that producers are pushing back. This framing allows for examining specific practices of being (or not) disciplined.

Approaching the fair trade audit through the lens of governmentality provides a viewpoint for assessing competing understandings of fair trade standards for production and development in Chenalhó. The experience of Maya Vinic demonstrates that farmers resist being disciplined as fair trade subjects. Although certification has become a prescriptive norm that is operationalized through standards whereby fair trade subjects are disciplined via surveillance, there are other ways that we might read the impacts of fair trade certification. My contribution here is to push against the normalization of the producer subject (as an object of surveillance and control) and illuminate the ways that the political struggles of producers mediate their interaction with the fair trade market. Yes, fair trade producers are disciplined and surveilled, but they also stave off the logics of fair trade certification, the audit, and the market at the same time.

Farmers negotiate a tradeoff between having a consistent buyer and a known price and their struggle for autonomy and maintaining subsistence livelihoods. In many ways, fair trade certification brings third-party certifier control over the territory of farmers’ fields while also enforcing a “will to improve” (Li 2007:4-6) in farmer communities. Li (ibid) and others concluded that this anti-political form of improvement fails to take into account power relations, structural inequalities, and agency. As such, a number of scholars in geography and other disciplines have focused on power imbalances within certification systems (cf. Bacon 2010; Dolan 2010; Jaffee 2014 [2007]; Lyon 2007; 2011; 2015; Mutersbaugh 2004; 2005; Naylor 2014; Renard 2005; Renard and Loconto 2013; Shreck 2002; 2005; Wilson 2010).

Anthropologists such as Dolan (2010) and Lyon (2011) argue that fair trade, while proffered as a system that rewards small producers, simultaneously manages their behavior and excludes them

from decision-making roles. Correspondingly, geographers examine producer well-being and power relations addressing issues of scale, market access and networks, moral economies, neoliberal governance, as well as, certification as a spatial fix (cf. Bacon 2010; Goodman 2004; Guthman 2007; Trauger 2014; Trentmann 2007; Wilson 2013), providing an important basis for asking questions about who benefits from certification. In this paper certification standards and autonomy are strange bedfellows as the surveillance, control, and development mandates that come with fair trade standards make possible a stable price and network that works with and against producer struggles to maintain subsistence production and reduce interaction with the state and market.

Investigating the intersection of the struggle for autonomy and production for the fair trade marketplace provides a distinctive example for examining the ongoing impacts of fair trade certification on existing politics and producer struggles ‘on the ground.’ Drawing from debates in current scholarship, this paper mirrors work by fair trade scholars that is focused on power imbalances in fair trade systems. Yet, I argue that the experience of Maya Vinic disrupts this vision of power relations in certification. Farmers as agents in their own right have harnessed fair trade certification as a tool to maintain their autonomy and resistance even as it encroaches on their struggle. Fair trade is often examined in the context of a neoliberal imaginary that narrowly reads it as an intervention in producer communities. This research offers a perspective that stands outside the framing of fair trade subjects as disciplined and controlled through fair trade standards. My theoretical approach here offers an intervention in the broader fair trade and certification literature, by stepping away from those approaches which seek to determine if fair trade is ‘working’ for producers. Instead I consider how the politics of certification and standards for development play out over contested spaces of autonomy and resistance in Chenalhó.

Critical to analyzing how fair trade functions in self-declared autonomous communities is an understanding of the complex politics at work in these spaces. Fair trade certification in theory acts as a tool of surveillance and development in producer communities. Yet, it is oversimplified to state that farmers participate in the market as subjects of neoliberal development. Farmers producing for Maya Vinic are pulled in many directions as part of their resistance—by cooperatives, markets, and social movements alike. By considering how producers in self-declared autonomous communities view and participate in fair trade, this study opens up the ways in which we think about fair trade certification and producer agency. My conclusions are grounded in encouraging more nuanced analyses of claims to empowerment and the form and function of so-called economic development in producer communities. I argue that rather than evaluating whether fair trade is ‘working’ for farmers, we should consider how standards for development and fair trade certification are negotiated by people as agents in their own right, not as fair trade subjects. Such an understanding first requires a discussion of the certification literature and fairer trade as a development mechanism, which is then followed by the analysis of the fair trade audit of Maya Vinic.

### **Certification and Fairer Trade?**

Initiatives to empower and develop marginalized communities through market access can be traced to the early 1900s. The broader movement to make trade fairer has served as the foundation for contemporary certification and market-based schemes. Certification and labeling systems were first put into place in 1988 when, together, farmers and activists initiated the first, third-party certification scheme called Max Havelaar in the Netherlands (Raynolds et al. 2004). Following the successes of Max Havelaar, the Fairtrade Labeling Organization (FLO) was



formed to provide an umbrella for new and emerging regional certifications and an international fair trade certification label. Transfair USA (now Fair Trade USA) was founded in 1999 and split from FLO (now Fairtrade International) in 2011 on the basis of increasing market access and product range. Scholars working on fair trade have contributed significant theoretical and empirical analysis regarding the movement and the market. Debate over what 'fair trade' should be reached a critical moment in 2011 with the divorce of certifiers Fairtrade International and Fair Trade USA. The split, which Fair Trade USA (2012) followed with a new campaign "Fair Trade for all," caused an uproar in the larger fair trade community as participants asked "who is fair trade for?"

The rise of neoliberal development models and the move towards deregulating global trade contributed to a divergence within the fair trade movement. Lyon argues that the contemporary development paradigm is one that "emphasizes the market, partnerships and the 'responsibilization of the poor' " (2015:163). Dolan further notes that within fair trade two paths emerged, one with "an idealist orientation toward trade justice, structural change, and human solidarity;" and another with "an instrumentalist focus on certification, standardization and market expansion" (2010:35). The divergence between 'the movement' and 'the market' ruptured the potentially transformative nature of so-called 'fair' trade. Lyon identifies the push from fair trade certifiers to incorporate increasing numbers of producers into the market, rather than focus on the inherent unevenness of capital and the structural conditions of global trade, as a "kinder, gentler form of business as usual" (2015:162). Far from disrupting the market, certification facilitates the maintenance of the neoliberal marketplace and the introduction of surveillance into producer communities.

The divide between movement and market can help explain the seeming paradox at work in Chenalhó. As the broader movement to create secure market access and solidarity networks collides with production and development standards, which seek to rationalize production and economic behaviors, farmers have attempted to harness the movement in order to withstand the market. Fair trade certification for farmers who are connected to broader political movements for autonomy (as both political actors and subsistence producers) is used as a tool to connect to support networks beyond the state. Fair trade coffee production assists with keeping farmers on the land and maintaining involvement in social movement politics. The market for these farmers is not panacea, nor a way to ‘lift them out of poverty’ but is instead another mechanism that is tied to the maintenance of subsistence livelihoods and used to resist the development plan of the state. These producers are first and foremost corn farmers.

Yet, fair trade certification operates as a corrective through providing market access. As market-oriented institutions, certification organizations take on what Li describes as a “trustee role,” which she argues is “defined by the claim to know how others should live, to know what is best for them, to know what they need” (2007:4). In the case of fair trade, this has been generally articulated as a “Northern” trustee enabling a “Southern” producer (Naylor 2014). Yet, third-party certifiers “render technical” the relations of coffee production for small farmers. A problem and solution are identified by “experts” who establish an “us and them” dichotomy that is anti-political, thereby dismissing the political economy of unequal trade relations and politics in place in fair trade producer communities (Li 2007:7; see also Ferguson 1994). Importantly, this anti-political trusteeship extends to the fair trade audit and surveillance of certified parties—as the audit is premised on translating the standards for certification into measurable results, which are universal in nature (Dolan 2010:40-41; see also Mutersbaugh 2002; 2005). This ‘audit culture’

has taken on greater scope as it not only measures accountability to certification standards but also seeks to improve their implementation and outcomes.

There is a dangerous assumption made by third-party certifiers that market integration is desirable and that small-scale coffee producers only farm coffee. This creation of the producer subject was continually revealed in participant observation and interviews. This exchange during the audit of Maya Vinic is telling in that regard:

**Auditor:** “Who has the smallest plot here?”

**Socio:** “I have ¼ hectare and get about 200 kilos from the harvest.”

**Auditor:** “How do you survive with 200 kilos?”

**Socio:** “It is difficult.”

In many cases for highland producers, coffee is one component of a diverse livelihood strategy that may include seasonal labor migration, subsistence food production, weaving, or other handicraft, and other income or non-income generating subsistence or labor activities. Yet, the fair trade premium for development and annual certification audit are an attempt to create and maintain farmers as fixed producer subjects. This is important because third-party certification organizations’ foci on community-wide development and the desire to improve economic behaviors of cooperatives and their members fail to take into account the particulars of farmers’ daily lives and politics in place.

Fairtrade International makes assertions of empowerment by arguing that certification is “giving farmers more control over their own lives” (FLO 2008 in Wilson 2010:85) even while certification standards attempt to structure producers’ lives around certified coffee production. Contemporary fair trade certification agencies are gatekeepers and standard setters. They control the certification of producer products and of importing agencies. Fairtrade International (FLO) is

one of the oldest third-party fair trade certifiers. They set standards for production and development and work with FLO-CERT, an independent verification body which reviews and grants certification to producers and traders. The production standards for small producers are reviewed every five years in consultation with ‘stakeholders’ and in compliance with International Labor Organization (ILO) and ISEAL (Code of Good Practice in Standard Setting) conventions (FLO 2012).<sup>6</sup> Crafted to assist with sustainable development, the standards are production requirements and are concerned with sourcing and management, environmental protection and the maintenance of biodiversity, labor conditions and child protection, development potential and democratic participation. FLO is also responsible for setting a minimum product price and a premium for community development. The price is set with consideration of labor hours, inputs, and costs and is designed as a safety net. The premium is set in relation to the price and its use is “restricted to investment in the producers’ business, livelihood and community” (FLO-CERT 2011:np) and, consistent with the broader stated goals of certification, to assist smallholders with organizing and building “thriving businesses” (FLO 2013:5).

Fair trade certification is one example of the many certifications that now exist for commodities and industries on the global market. There is a rich literature that surveys the processes, practices, and imbalances of certification that I do not replicate here. However, three important themes can be drawn out from this literature: first, scholars identify certification as neoliberal stand-in for governmental regulation (see: Bartley 2003; Brown and Getz 2008; Dolan 2010; Guthman 2007; Hatanaka and Busch 2008). Second, certification is cited as a barrier to marketplace entry and as a new form of power and control over producers (see: Barrientos et al. 2003; Barrientos and Dolan 2012; Busch 2000; Getz and Shreck 2006; Guthman 2004; Jaffee

2014 [2007]; Lyon 2007; 2011; Mutersbaugh 2004; 2005; Ponte 2002; Renard 2005; Renard and Loconto 2013; Wilson 2016). Third, recently scholars have grown concerned about the cooptation and weakening of certification standards (see: Jaffee 2012; Jaffee and Howard 2015; Wilson and Mutersbaugh 2016). The literature on organic standards and voluntary food labels has been especially important in underlining the promises and pitfalls of certification.

Using framings from Polanyian to Convention theory, certification studies cover issues of sustainability, quality, market embeddedness, social and power relations, governance and policing, marketplace entry, and moral economies. A common thread in this literature is an assessment of whether and how certification ‘works’ and for whom. In specifically addressing fair trade certification many authors analyze the power relations and systems of control that exist in producer communities (cf. Jaffee 2014 [2007]; Lyon 2011; Renard and Loconto 2013). Lyon argues that fair trade certification causes farmers to adapt their distinctive livelihoods to universal standards (2011:124). Such accounts, while important, largely focus on the policing that happens within communities, the exclusion of producers from cooperatives, and/or the imbalances in who participates in standard-setting. This paper adds a dimension to certification studies more broadly, and fair trade certification specifically, by contributing data and analysis that read certification differently. Rather than focusing on the successes and failures of market-driven, certified, ethical exchange, I evaluate how farmers negotiate certification standards in the context of politics in place. In evaluating this negotiation by farmers in self-declared autonomous communities, the focus turns to how fair trade is integrated (or not) into their lives as a component of struggles for autonomy, not solely as producers of coffee and subjects of fair trade certification.

## The Experience of the Maya Vinic Coffee Cooperative

Highland farming families have been cultivating coffee for cooperatives or as *libres* (producers not tied to a cooperative) for decades. The introduction of fair trade certification in conjunction with farmer demands for self-determination in the past twenty years, however, has reshaped the spaces of farming communities. This takes the form of the creation of farmer cooperatives, changes in fields through organic and fair trade standards, as well as in market-driven development. While fair trade continues to act as a neoliberal fix in producer communities, it is also shaped by local histories, diverse economic imaginaries, and politics in place. The tensions embedded in self-declared autonomous communities are not based on the introduction of fair trade alone, but in a larger politics of production that has long complicated indigenous peasant relations with the market and the state. Unequal land tenure and structural discrimination against indigenous peoples have shaped the highlands over time.

Racial hierarchies and inequalities cemented during the colonial period in Mexico persist in Chiapas where indigenous peoples continue to struggle against their anchoring at the bottom of an increasingly deep socio-racial system. Struggles for self-determination and land acquisition have ebbed and flowed through long periods of subjugation by elites and the state. In the 1800s indigenous occupied lands were viewed as *terrenos baldíos* (vacant lands) and were sold to non-indigenous elites (Stephen 2002:92), displacing indigenous peoples and effectively forcing the sale of their labor on plantations (including coffee *fincas*). Following the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917), government programs sought to incorporate the indigenous population into the economic plan of Mexico. Indigenista policies, which were focused on the ‘westernization’ of the indigenous population, were developed alongside land reform in the 1940s and 1950s (Bobrow-Strain 2007:91).

The promise of land reform gave the state a tremendous amount of support from peasants for government programming and politics. As Bobrow-Strain notes, these policies attempted to reshape indigenous identity in a manner that suggested a greater relationship between indigenous peoples and the state (2007:91-92). This clientelism is evident in indigenous livelihood strategies and demands for recognition from the mid-1900s until the beginning of the neoliberal era. Coffee cultivation represents an important site of peasant-state relations in the pre-neoliberal period. Indigenous farmers initially relied on a corporatist state as market intermediary and were subject to significant change in their relations with the state following neoliberal restructuring. Changes in the coffee sector and in land tenure helped to set the stage for indigenous political organizing.

In an area that relied on patron-client relations and subsistence farming to maintain livelihoods, the large-scale introduction of coffee to the highlands (1960-70s) also heralded new social-economic relations. As an economic 'modernization' project was undertaken by Mexico following the Revolution and accelerated by the end of World War II, the promotion of coffee production was viewed as a way to develop rural areas; subsistence corn farming was often viewed by the state as a sign of failure and waste of land (Bobrow-Strain 2007). During this period, coffee production became a state-sponsored activity that facilitated the organization of indigenous peasant groups into cooperatives and away from subsistence farming.

The coffee cooperative is an important legacy of the pre-neoliberal era in Mexico, when farmers relied on credit and inputs from the state coffee agency, INMECAFE (1973-1990). As Jaffee notes, the stable prices and credit offered by INMECAFE created a dependency that small producers felt acutely when it was deconstructed in the wake of the International Coffee Agreement collapse (1989) and neoliberal reforms (2014 [2007:50-51]). Participation in a cooperative that is fair trade certified exposes farmers to similar paternalistic approaches (credit,

stable pricing, input support) and new standards for production simultaneously. Fair trade certifiers have, to some extent, filled the void left by INMECAFE (and the state as *patrón*). Yet, certification brings additional standards for production and community development that INMECAFE did not.

In the wake of state-sponsored violence following the Zapatista uprising, the coffee crisis, and the continual failure of state- and market-led economic development in their communities, many highland producers declared their communities autonomous. Rather than be part of Mexico's development plan, which they argue is concerned with the elimination of indigenous peasants, farmers have used a combination of centuries-old subsistence farming techniques (*milpa*: corn, beans, and squash) and coffee production to maintain their livelihoods and effectively ignore the state. For Maya Vinic, coffee production has also been an important way to bypass the state and withstand the violence of dispossession. In the quote that opens this paper, a founding member Maya Vinic articulates the purpose in forming a cooperative. It was not born from the Zapatista movement or from economic necessity but from the need to form new economic and socio-political relations outside the state. Harnessing the *movement* for fair trade became a way for farmers to resist the structural violence of the marketplace and neoliberal development while allowing individual farmers to bypass the state. However, their interaction with the fair trade *marketplace* has introduced new forms of development and surveillance in their communities.

Third-party standards themselves are an important locus for development in fair trade producer communities; however, the fair trade premium that is given every year to be used toward the Fairtrade Development Plan extends the reach beyond the fields and into producer's homes, communities, and cooperatives. One of the main goals of FLO is to promote business and



economic development. The standards have guidelines describing the “requirements that are unique to Fairtrade:”

...fairtrade should lead to the demonstrable empowerment and environmentally sustainable social and economic development of producer organizations and their members, and through them, of the workers employed by the organizations or by the members, and the surrounding community (FLO 2011:28).

There is an annual audit conducted with certified organizations that evaluates the implementation of the standards and development plan. Every year Maya Vinic must pay to bring an auditor to their cooperative and communities. Among the auditor’s responsibilities are the reviewing of financial documents, visiting member’s randomly selected coffee plots, meeting with members in select communities, providing fair trade certification education, and discussing future community development plans.

While everyday practice and compliance is left in the hands of the cooperative, there is a mismatch of goals between the cooperative and FLO. This mismatch was revealed during the 2013 audit through differing interpretations of empowerment and development. FLO seeks to empower and improve small producer organizations and their communities through capitalist-driven interaction with the market, while Maya Vinic seeks to create opportunities for their members to receive education, training and cash income to reduce market reliance and ignore the state. While FLO suggests that certification leads to “demonstrable empowerment,” they also have a very specific idea of how “empowerment” can be demonstrated by cooperative members, their communities, and the cooperative itself—primarily through successful business management, documentation of sales and increased yields, and sponsored community development projects. While third-party certifiers take a hands-off approach to the day-to-day workings of the cooperatives that they regulate, the audit serves as an intervention.

The empirics discussed below are drawn from fieldwork conducted between 2010 and 2013 that examined the practices of fair trade coffee producers in self-declared autonomous communities in the official highland municipality of Chenalhó, Chiapas, Mexico. This portion of the study was carried out with members of Las Abejas who produce for the Maya Vinic coffee cooperative. The proposal to conduct research was discussed in a delegate meeting of Maya Vinic members where I had a dialogue with the coffee cooperative leadership in Spanish and our discussion was translated for the benefit of non-bilingual, Tzotzil-speaking members. Discussion was held in Tzotzil regarding my presence and the research trajectory. The members voted in favor of allowing me to work with them. Each of the sections that follow are drawn from observation and interviews conducted during the 2013 Maya Vinic audit, and they help us to understand the uneven and contradictory practices of certification and development in the highlands.

The sections that follow detail the audit of performance, people and place. In ‘Auditing Performance’ I turn attention to how Maya Vinic presented their cooperative in the audit as it relates to audit expectations, perceptions, and surveillance of employment and business performance. The second section, ‘Auditing People’ details how individual practices and economic behaviors are audited and surveilled as part of fair trade certification and how certification standards impact daily agricultural activities for producers who are tied up in labor activities related to both market and subsistence production. Finally, in ‘Auditing Place’ I consider the differing viewpoints between the cooperative and the audit on efforts towards community improvement and draw out additional meanings of ‘community’ which may not be tied to any one place.

### *Auditing Performance*

Maya Vinic is a coffee cooperative with over five-hundred members in fifty-two communities within and adjacent to the highlands. Coffee cooperatives are not a new phenomenon in Mexico, nor are they synonymous with fair trade certification. Coffee farmers have been organizing in cooperatives for a long period (cf. Martínez-Torres 2006) and have long-standing community-based systems for social organization and work (cf. Nash 2001). Maya Vinic serves an important purpose for members of Las Abejas, creating a space where members and their families have a wider support network and new opportunities. It is populated by a group of people who joined together to support the larger community of subsistence farmers who declared autonomy in the face of state-sponsored paramilitary threats and the push by the state to privatize their lands and effectively subsume subsistence production. The cooperative is a space for supporting this community and participation for farmers is one of many strategies to maintain their livelihoods with dignity. The cooperative performs a service to this *community of farmers*. At the same time, the cooperative is audited as an economic organization that is run as a capitalist-driven business.

The 2013 audit by FLO began and ended in the cooperative offices in the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas. The entirety of the office staff and the leadership of the cooperative were present for the first audit meeting. The auditor explained the purpose and functions of the audit and detailed the four-day schedule, which began with a survey of the office documents and concluded with the announcement of the audit results.

The first review of the office documents was focused on employment. There are nineteen people employed by the cooperative and every single employee (with one exception) is a *socio* (cooperative member) or is part of the immediate family of a *socio*. The Maya Vinic office has

five employees who serve as cooperative administrators, keeping the books, managing domestic roasting and their city-based café. There are three coffee roasters and four café workers who sell pre-packaged coffee and drinks. In Chenalhó there are four bodega workers, who receive coffee from *socios* and maintain the coffee processing equipment, one person managing the finances and distributing payments to *socios* upon coffee delivery, and one person who manages a small shop that is owned by the cooperative. They all grow coffee (or are from coffee producing families) and use their employment as another income earning strategy or as an educational opportunity.

The experience of the city employees is demonstrative of the cooperative's approach. For example, two daughters of a *socio* work in the café while they receive medical training in the city. Their income assists with covering the costs of living and studying in San Cristóbal. Their father is the lone male in his family with a wife and six daughters. He is "very proud" and explained, "my daughters, they will finish their training and then return home to work on health projects for the cooperative." Upon their departure, their jobs will be filled by other cooperative members seeking short-term opportunities in the city. A vacancy had recently become available for roasting coffee; the newest addition to the roasting team was the youngest (sixteen) and had just begun school in town. He explained his desire to go to school: "I will not get much land because I am the third [son] and so I want to study agroecology and maybe teach." My conversations with the bodega workers reveal similar strategizing. They sought a short-term employment opportunity to earn a little extra income to cover new or unexpected costs (e.g. expanding their family, purchasing medicine for an ill family member). The cooperative uses their handful of positions to facilitate education and training for members outside their communities with the expectation that they will help support the resistance and autonomy with

their skills upon their return to the highlands. The president confirmed this during the audit; when asked by the auditor about the benefits to the employees he responded, “people have opportunities to work in many places and learn many things, for example, they can go work in the office or the café and learn.” This is an important perspective on what employment means for members of Maya Vinic.

Following the president’s statement, the auditor made their meaning plainer. They were concerned that there were no healthcare or other monetary benefits for the employees. Of further concern was the lack of documentation of salaries, levels of salary per position, expectations for workers, a schedule for performance review, and a training system. In the final review the auditor addressed regulating and managing employees and employment. They explained that certain regulations must be followed, including age restrictions, written contracts, and healthcare. It was recommended that all workers sign contracts with Maya Vinic that stipulated their workdays, their benefits, salary and review, and healthcare provisions.

There are competing ideas about the purpose of employment by the cooperative. For members and employees of Maya Vinic, the cooperative is an additional component of livelihood strategizing that centers on maintaining autonomy. The ability to receive training in healthcare, for example, had become very important as treatment facilities are not immediately available to members of Las Abejas. A *socio* explained that if someone needed treatment they would have to travel up to two hours to the nearest clinic:

There is not a clinic close by that we can go to. There are some clinics in the communities here, but they are in communities where there has been conflict and our people are being killed and also where the government has made the clinics. If we go there they ask where we are from and they don’t help us. It is part of our conflict as Abejas. There is still fighting between those who are not Abejas. It is hard, but we must go to Yabteclum or to San Cristóbal if we are sick...It is a conflict in our communities.

This quote demonstrates not only the lack of sufficient resources for many members of Maya Vinic, but also the violence within the communities that *socios* reside in. Thus, being an employee of the cooperative is a way to subsidize training that can then be returned to self-declared autonomous communities. This training could fall under the “empowerment” goals of FLO. However, FLO does not stipulate how “empowerment” is supposed to occur and instead, it appears that the audit is measuring and managing the relative “successes” of the cooperative as a capitalist-driven business that can achieve independence from third party certifiers—a contradiction in and of itself. The cooperative is surveilled through the lens of the market. The audit is the technology of surveillance and discipline, yet, even while members of Maya Vinic attempt to adhere to the standards and meet the demands of the audit, they demonstrate that they are not normalized fair trade subjects.

### *Auditing People*

Farmers in self-declared autonomous highland communities participate in broader politics and organizing that extends beyond their lives as ‘fair trade coffee producers.’ The political discourses of autonomy that are embedded in these farmers lives are not tied solely to organizing for indigenous rights, or mobilizing forms of self-governance and reliance, but are multiple and nuanced. On a daily basis, autonomy for farmers can be about self-sufficiency and secure access to food and land. On a longer timeline, however, it is about resisting violence and rejecting the state and neoliberal marketplace that takes on varied and competing forms. Farmer relations with fair trade certification complicates this rejection as the apolitical, capitalist- and development-driven standards and surveillance pervade their lives. The 2013 audit was focused on economic behaviors; yet for the producers the focus was price. Key to this difference is the

construction of farmers as fair trade subjects. The audit is conducted with the viewpoint that farmers are coffee producers needing to “lift themselves out of poverty,” however, the producers view themselves as subsistence corn farmers struggling for autonomy.

As part of the audit, a number of *cafetales* were inspected and meetings were held with *socios* in randomly selected communities. On the one hand, the auditor sought to educate the *socios* about the benefits of fair trade, improved livelihoods, and the use of the social premium for community needs, while on the other hand, the auditor explained the need for careful documentation, the difference between a *socio* and a *libre* in terms of income and support, as well as improving product quality. These two potentially competing narratives demonstrate a dominant viewpoint of how *socios* should behave and what fair trade producers and producer communities should look like. In the haste to ‘empower’ producers third-party certifiers artificially homogenize them. Such an implication constructs a producer subject who is seeking become a “rational economic actor” (cf. Nicholls and Opal 2005:54) who produces for the betterment of their entire community.

The auditor had a constant refrain related to business-like behavior with the cooperative’s documentation. In every meeting with *socios* the auditor asked to see the documentation of their harvest and their receipts from the cooperative for the year. Out of three separate community meetings on the first day of the audit no group was able to produce sufficient documentation for the auditor. Unable to comply they were told:

You need to save your receipts for five years so that we can check every year. At the very least you should have them from the past three years. You need to find somewhere safe to put them *where they won’t be eaten by rats...* it is an obligation you have for the fair trade certification (author’s emphasis).

This characterization of why farmers might not have their documents reifies the framing of producers as a ‘project’ of development. The members took this to heart and before the next set

of community meetings word had spread. The next day, when asked to produce their receipts, many members came forward with the documents that they had available to them from their sales to the cooperative.

Other comments from the FLO auditor confirmed that FLO looks at farmer cooperatives as for-profit businesses and asks them to function as such. The auditor reiterated the point about documentation, stating that the *socios* “should know how much they are producing each year and the difference so that they can improve their product.” In so doing the threat of the loss of certification (and the consistent buyer and price) becomes tied to the improvement of their economic behaviors. This surveillance extends beyond the managing of farmer practices through standards for production and instead illuminates attempts by third party certifiers to shape farmer actions and behaviors in the marketplace.

Simultaneously, in each community meeting the auditor asked what problems the farmers were having and what could be done to help. Over three separate community meetings *socios* explained that they “needed a better price for coffee.” At the end of each community meeting the auditor would ask if there were any questions and make comments about the importance of fair trade, members were told: “FLO is concerned with improving the quality and yield of the products too, how you can produce better and more. We want to help.” These interactions point to a “trustee” form of fair trade in which the certifier is “enabling” empowerment even as they seek to manage producer practices. Maya Vinic *socios* are farmers who work in coffee to gain cash income for the purchase of items that cannot be produced at home. The primary use of their land is the growing of corn. Almost none of the farmers that I spoke with had any real attachment to fair trade aside from working to keep the certification and receiving a better price.<sup>7</sup> For the farmers it was less about improving their product or increasing their yields, but being



able to bring in enough cash income. Of the many conversations I had, this quote from a farmer who grew between two- and three-hundred kilos of coffee each year stands out:

They say it is fair trade, they said that, but this year it is a really low price...The coffee is a lot of work and it takes a lot of days, but the price is really low. If we need to buy something at the store or medicine it [the price] keeps increasing. But the coffee price does not go up. We here, when we have a meeting of the cooperative we want to talk about being able to provide for our families...It is a problem when you produce your own food...We need a better price.

Other farmers made similar comments: “the price is bad this year” or “the price keeps dropping.”

Farmers whose primary livelihood is in subsistence production commit time and dedicate scarce land and labor to the production of a non-edible crop, coffee. The production of coffee under fair trade and organic standards presents a trade-off in land and time allocation, reducing the space and time that is dedicated to the *milpa*. As members of a social movement that seeks autonomy from the state and the market, their production as subsistence farmers is critical. One farmer explained, “The *milpa* is our life. It saves our lives. Without corn there is no life.” The trade-off between coffee for income and food for subsistence is a precarious one.

Farmers, especially those in leadership positions, continually remarked that they had less time for the *milpa* because of their work in the *cafetal*. In individual interviews with the four co-op leaders all of them remarked that because of their time commitment to governance and their own coffee plots they could not dedicate as much time to food production. Indeed, in every interview I conducted with coffee farmers, they discussed the problem of having to buy corn because their seasonal storage had run out (see also: Bacon et al. 2014). In all discussions I had about autonomy the most important component was the ability to produce corn and especially not having to purchase it. “We do not want to buy corn” was a consistent remark made by *socios*, and it would be followed with a litany of reasons, “because it is: ‘bad,’ ‘transgenic,’ ‘from the government,’ ‘needing chemicals,’ ” or more intimately because they identify as corn farmers.

Many recognized that coffee production displaced corn production to some extent, one farmer put it simply: “We need more labor for more corn.”

Often senior family members would rely on younger family members to labor in the *milpa* while they worked in the *cafetal* or performed important coffee cooperative or social movement duties. This was the case with many members and it was reported to me by one farmer:

...because of the work in the *cafetal* and with the cooperative I have less time to work in the *milpa*. I have help from one of my sons. He works in the *milpa*. I have five parcels of land, but because my other son is in school I can only work three parcels right now. Two of them are in coffee and one is in *milpa*.

Another farmer extended this to other forms of food production, explaining to me that his family used to keep a little kitchen garden by the house, but now there is “no room, no time.” In addition, space adjacent to the housing structures in communities is increasingly being filled with concrete patios, an investment in the ‘bettering’ of their product—coffee is laid out to dry on patios before it is sold to the cooperative.

Farmers in self-declared autonomous communities rely on fair trade coffee sales to assist with improving the conditions in which they live while maintaining a primarily subsistence-based lifestyle. Certification is a double-edged sword whereby farmers benefit from consistent cash income but are increasingly pulled into a system that denies their productive practices and way of life while ignoring the structural conditions within communities and the marketplace at large. This tension significantly constrains farmers who have declared autonomy from the state, as the threat of losing certification and a stable price is tied to their behavior. Again, certifiers’ attempts to ‘fix’ fair trade subjects rests upon a dangerous assumption of homogeneity; that members of fair trade certified coffee cooperatives only farm coffee—a point demonstrated in the earlier exchange between the *socio* and the auditor about “survival.”

### *Auditing Place*

Certification standards are predicated on particular development-related outcomes tied to the idea that small producers can build better lives and livelihoods through fair trade-driven income earnings and community-based development (cf. FLO 2011). Thus, in exchange for a price, farmers invite third-party surveillance into their fields and communities through standards for production and development. The creation of fair trade subjects has been a critical piece of the certification process (Naylor 2014). Certification is now a site of development and a neoliberal fix in marginalized communities. This “fix” is both used as a mechanism to solve what are viewed as problems for small producers (Nigh 2002 in Lyon 2011:152) yet it also serves to hold producer subjects in place by tying them to the marketplace and to existing relations of trade, economic development and living conditions. Taken together, standards for certification and audit reify the producer subject fixing them as both a development project and an ‘empowered’ community member.

In FLO’s published guidelines for “development potential” the requirements for development and reporting are expanded on for every year the cooperative has been certified, yet FLO is careful to dispense project design and monitoring to the cooperative (2011:28-30). This “potential” is meant to be realized is through the dissemination of a premium, which is an extra payment to Maya Vinic for use to improve their product and to complete community-based development projects. The guidelines for the required development plan for small producers states, “all people involved in the production of fairtrade products can benefit and demonstrate solidarity with their communities” (FLO 2011:29). What this means in practice is less clear.

Highland communities are heterogeneous and in many coffee-producing communities where Maya Vinic producers live, there may be producers from other cooperatives or other farmers with drastically different political leanings (*partidistas*). These politics make it very difficult for Maya Vinic to deploy community development projects with their social premium. In 2013, the leadership proposed three development projects that had been decided on democratically by the *socios* in the general assembly meeting: 1) to purchase a truck for the pick-up of coffee produced by *socios* outside of the highlands; 2) to expand their urban offices, making more room for their domestic roasting facility; and 3) to install a drain in the newly built kitchen adjacent to the cooperative in Chenalhó. However, the representative of FLO said that the premium needs to be used toward the betterment of the product and productivity of the *socios*, “at least seventy-five percent toward the community” and argued that these were not community-oriented projects. The auditor further emphasized that they must do a better job of explaining the community project and its importance in the general assembly.

Community-wide projects tend to be sites of conflict in Chenalhó. Investments are made by the cooperative or by the government in certain sectors of the community and such territories become contentious. In the politically fractious and divided highland communities, the ability to build infrastructure or facilitate community-wide benefits is significantly diminished. Toward the end of the 2013 coffee harvest, the cooperative was fighting with the official municipal government over a pipeline that had been laid over the territory of the Maya Vinic cooperative to serve *partidistas* in the adjacent community. The government claimed that it had paid for the property and was unwilling to halt the project. The Maya Vinic leadership denied these claims as lies (or considered them bribes paid within the community). As they sought to determine why the government would make such claims there was a marked change in cooperative and community

relations. Such sites become zones of conflict and have the tendency to heighten tensions in communities rather than ‘demonstrating solidarity.’ Indeed, improvements made in divided communities and investments in ‘productivity’ are often places of sabotage and theft. A number of *socios* I spoke with related experiences of theft, specifically investments made for the ‘betterment of their product’ such as equipment for de-pulping coffee beans and hives built for bee-keeping (women *socios* were regarded as frequent targets of such thefts).

When I asked about fair trade development projects and what the premium was being used for in communities in Chenalhó, one of the cooperative members explained to me that the Las Abejas families are a minority compared to other organizations in Chenalhó. Therefore, it is very difficult to do community projects due to conflicts over territory or political differences within communities. To emphasize this point, the same *socio* pointed to a water vessel that had a label stating that it was a project of fair trade, and said, “here we have to buy individual water vessels for families instead of doing a big community water project, we can’t use the premium for that.” The example of the health clinics related earlier offers additional evidence of the conflict within communities.

There is a significant gap between the livelihood desires of *socios* linked to Las Abejas and the outcomes envisioned by third-party certifiers. The standards set by FLO and the auditor’s recommendations point to a fundamentally flawed understanding of producer communities. Maya Vinic sees their proposed projects as assisting their ‘community’ of *socios*. Yet FLO sees producer communities as homogenous and tied to territory while considering economic development plans to be universally beneficial. The FLO auditor remarked, “in fair trade you have a stable price and you have the premium. In the case of the social premium it should be for the improvement of the product and for the benefit of the community.” Never mind the fact that

Maya Vinic has members in fifty-two different communities in Chiapas and that they typically are the minority members of such communities. In many cases they live alongside *partidistas*—and in the highlands, people intimately connected with the paramilitary group that perpetrated the 1997 massacre against Las Abejas. Thus, even as farmers push to uphold both political commitments to Las Abejas and the cooperative more broadly, they are negotiating standards for development that do not take into account place and power dynamics on the ground.

Drawing on his work in Nicaragua, Wilson (2016) describes the dynamic of fair trade certification as one in which whole communities become the subjects of the audit. Third-party certifiers, through control and surveillance, set-up their own boundaries that effectively enclose producer spaces. These “certification enclosures” (ibid, np) create artificially bounded spaces that elide the politics and struggles that may or may not be tied to production for the fair trade marketplace. Such enclosures are based in an imaginary of a fair trade producer community that exists as the ‘fixed’ subject of empowerment and development. The way that Maya Vinic approaches community development pushes back against the apolitical and prescriptive development measures recommended by the third-party certifier that attempt to capture and homogenize community territory and behavior. This suggests that although certification and audit systems are predicated on instilling a “will to improve” in producer communities, and producers demonstrate adherence during the audit period, a friction exists. The creation and normalization of a fair trade producer subject and the ‘fixing’ of producer communities is not absolute.

### **Unfixing the Producer Subject**

The trade of certified products is articulated as one taking place in a “fairer market where small-producers can build sustainable livelihoods” (see: FLO 2013:5). However, how this is put into practice cannot be universal in nature. Despite dominant narratives that construct neoliberal development as inevitable and without alternative, farmers in Chenalhó continue to maintain subsistence livelihoods that are bolstered by interactions with coffee cooperatives connected to the fair trade marketplace. In order to have cash income for the purchase of food in lean times and for items that they cannot produce at home, farmers aligned with Las Abejas encounter trade-offs between their politics and practice. They struggle for autonomy but continue to engage in market-based livelihoods that are linked to global exchanges, which subjects them to standards that are incongruent with community-based politics. Fair trade systems are predicated on integrating producers into the market. By examining a particular practice of surveillance (certification audit) from the ‘bottom-up’ (see: Vorbrugg 2015) specific relations of power in place are revealed.

Certification systems have a direct impact on population and territory as they are an attempt to manage and control production and behavior in coffee producing communities. Analyzing how fair trade is practiced and performed in the context of the audit assists with understanding multiple and competing farmer commitments. In Chenalhó, certification clashes with subsistence livelihoods, which undergird struggles for autonomy. This analysis presents an alternative approach to thinking about the local realities of fair trade certification. While previous studies of certification (in fair trade and beyond) assist with identifying the disciplinary power embedded in certification, broader and more nuanced understandings of how certification functions in place are necessary. As more critiques emerge examining who benefits from fair trade, it is clear that assessing the benefits of certification and whether fair trade certification is

working for producers is not enough. If, as certification studies suggest, fair trade certification is another facet of the neoliberal market, then the answer to the question of whether fair trade is ‘working’ for farmers is readily apparent. If we are to understand how farmers are interacting with the market and what type of market relations are important for small-producers, we must start asking different questions. My intervention here demonstrates that fair trade certification attempts to create and fix producer subjects, yet it is neither panacea nor problem, but an engagement that takes on multiple (if competing) forms.

As scholars working on fair trade and development more broadly we should strive to open up new lines of inquiry where certification can be reexamined and theorized in the context of place-based politics. Trade and economic development should be evaluated as constituents of the fair trade label, which has fixed ‘impoverished’ economic development subjects. Fair trade certification has assisted in exposing the friction in attempting to create a market-based solution to a market-based problem. Such solutions are couched in an understanding of who small-producers are and who they could or should be that is mired in imaginaries of development and empowerment that emanate from those who retain economic power. If we are to begin asking questions that are directed at exposing who the real beneficiaries of fair trade certification are we must step outside this model and unfix the producer subject.



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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> All interviews took place in Chiapas and were translated from Spanish to English by the author.

<sup>2</sup> In 1992, the pacifist group Sociedad Civil Las Abejas (The Bees Civil Society) was organized in response to land conflict and injustice against women (Tavanti 2003). The founding members of Maya Vinic are participants in Las Abejas, a movement in solidarity with (but distinct from) the Zapatistas.

<sup>3</sup> For more detailed accounts of the Zapatista movement see: Collier and Quaratiello 2005; Earle and Simonelli 2005; Stahler-Sholk 2007; Stephen 2002.

<sup>4</sup> In early 1994, thirty-four official municipalities across Chiapas were declared autonomous (Stephen 2002:76).

<sup>5</sup> Negotiations with the Mexican state following the 1994 uprising led to an Indigenous Rights Accord (The San Andrés Accords), however, Congress failed to ratify the document as written, instead presenting a significantly restricted set of rights for passage (Stephen 2002).

<sup>6</sup> On fair trade standards, see: Granville and Dine 2013.

<sup>7</sup> The fair trade price floor for coffee: \$1.40 per pound (additional: \$0.30 for organic), roughly 30 pesos per kilo in 2012; the price in 2011 had been 45 pesos.