

“Some are more fair than others”: fair trade certification, development, and north-south subjects

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Abstract

At the same time as fair trade certified products are capturing an increasing market share, a growing number of scholars and practitioners are raising serious questions about who benefits from certification. Through a critique of north–south narratives, this paper draws on contemporary themes in fair trade scholarship to draw out different ways of thinking about fair trade outside of the dichotomous north–south framing. I argue that, through the creation of fair trade subjects of the “global north” and “global south,” certification has normalized and naturalized dichotomous power relations. The primary concern of this paper is to demonstrate the problems with situating certification and scholarship in the north–south binary and to push examination toward a more nuanced analysis of how certification and development are shaped in-place. This intervention is important for assisting with stepping away from long-standing debates regarding the effectiveness of certification, and additionally in contributing to critical thinking on economic development more broadly.

Keywords

Fair trade, Development, Global north–south, Certification, Geopolitics

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Introduction

Fair Trade represents a critique of historically rooted international trade inequalities and efforts to create more egalitarian commodity networks linking marginalized producers in the global South with progressive consumers in the global North. (Raynolds 2009, p. 1083)

Fair trade certification is generally discussed as a tool for addressing pressing issues of inequality in the global economy. The quote above captures the manner in which many scholars situate fair trade in contemporary discussions. Fair trade certification and labeling by third-party groups emerged as an effort between small-scale producers and such groups to shorten the commodity supply chain, provide access to otherwise inaccessible markets, and create opportunities for producers to receive a price premium for their commodities.¹ The fair trade label has become ubiquitous, provisioning an increasing number of goods to far-flung marketplaces. At the same time as more products gain fair trade certification, there is debate in the scholarly community over the effectiveness of fair trade. Scholarly work on fair trade has transitioned into a more critical phase (cf. Bacon 2010; Dolan 2010; Fridell 2007a, 2007b; Jaffee 2007; Lyon 2011), however, this work is largely caught up in stalemated debates over the benefits of certification and much of this scholarship unquestioningly situates fair trade within the geopolitical narrative of the global north-south. As a system of certification, fair trade initiated standards for

¹ For the purposes of this paper I am explicitly addressing fair trade *certification* and not the broader social movement to make trade more fair (unless otherwise specified). The movement to make trade more fair has been an important contributor to the development and deployment of fair trade certification, however, in the past decade the broader goals of the social movement and third-party certifiers have diverged (see Dolan 2010).

production and livelihood that are now normalized, the effect of which has created a naturalized divide between a “consuming north” and a “producing south.”

In this paper I contend that the terms of certification in the marketplace and scholarly debates over the merits of fair trade are bound up in long-standing development discourses that have created two distinct and geographically segregated economic groups—“southern producers” and “northern consumers.” Consider this quote from Fair Trade USA (formerly TransFair USA): “Our vision is nothing less than restructuring the relationship between producer and consumer—the trade inequalities between North and South” (TransFair USA 2002 quoted in Reynolds 2002, p. 411). Examples such as this one make the dangerous assumption that the so-called “global north” is made up of consumers and the “global south,” producers. This narrative of the global north-south is described by Alexander Murphy as a simple “dichotomization of the world,” which is “fundamentally problematic” (2013, p. 140). The difficulty in this case is not only due to the geographic misrepresentation of a “bi-modal world,” or the disparities within countries, but is additionally a result of neoliberal understandings of what economic development is, and who it is for. Although the global north-south narrative is considered an improvement on the more “pejorative” terms that preceded it (Murphy 2013, p. 140), it still perpetuates a dangerous binary, which creates subjects of the so-called “global north” who are “helping” and subjects of the “global south” who are “in need of help.” Such categorizations have significantly impacted how power is organized globally (cf. Slater 1997) and how development is deployed. Indeed, fair trade certification as an “alternative” economic development strategy has had the effect of making “some more fair than others.”²

There are three common themes within discussions of fair trade, namely that the sale of certified goods: (1) creates “consumer-producer linkages” and reveals the conditions of production; (2) supports “trade not aid”; and (3) works “in and against the market.” Put differently, scholars have debated whether fair trade certification is: non-fetishized, an economic development panacea for producers, and an alternative to the neoliberal market. A number of scholars have contributed to these conversations, yet the concern of this paper is not to address each theoretical position, but instead attempt to group such scholarship and offer a critical literature review through a discussion of the problematic of the global north-south lens.

² Here I have borrowed from Orwell (1954) in recognition of the controlling tendencies of discourse.

Contemporary discussions of certification take on a particular geographic framing through the narrative of the global north-south and the indiscriminating adoption of this lens renders critical assessment of certification less useful. The central focus of this paper is to offer a critique of the north-south framing and how it has been manifested in literature on fair trade certification and to push scholars not to rely on the north-south binary but instead to analyze how uneven trade relations are shaped, in-place.³ Such interventions are important not only for fair trade scholarship, but for critical geopolitics and economic development more broadly.

To situate my analysis as it relates to fair trade certification, I consider the problem of the global north-south development narrative and the discourse embedded in scholarship pertaining to certification. I argue that distinct subjectivities—what I will refer to as “north-south subjects”—situated in a “consuming north” and “producing south” are created through the adoption of this discourse. Drawing from the standards for the certification of small-scale coffee production I assess how a north-south subject approach to debating the effectiveness of fair trade has led scholars to overlook important issues enmeshed by certification. Additionally, I examine the neoliberal economic imaginary of fair trade and posit the regionally based Small Producers’ Symbol (Símbolo de los Pequeños Productores) as a possible alternative imaginary. Ultimately, I conclude that contemporary narratives and the terms of fair trade allow for uneven power relations to persist between north-south subjects, generate new spaces of control, and that scholarship concerning the effectiveness of fair trade has become entrenched within these subjectivities and normalized spaces. Rather than putting the final nail in the fair trade certification coffin, I argue that intervention in and reimagining of current debates outside the narrative of the global north-south are instead a starting point for both opening up new lines of scholarly inquiry and asking critical questions about economic development and place-based production-consumption.

Situating certification and the problem of the global north-south

³ In this vein, the work of Getz and Shreck (2006) on “place-based understanding of certification” offers one of the first major critiques of fair trade and is a nuanced analysis of the meanings mobilized in certification vis-à-vis localized producer socio-economic realities.

The history of “fairer” trade extends into the late 1800s, and for the purposes of this paper, is discussed only in the context of the last several decades (for detailed accounts see: Bacon 2008; Barratt Brown 1993; Bowes 2011; Fridell 2004). Fair trade, as a system of certification was built on post-war attempts by faith-based groups and alternative trade organizations (ATOs) to establish direct trading relations in response to conditions precipitated by economic downturns following WWII and world trade agreements more generally (E. Fisher 2009; Nicholls and Opal 2005). The first labeling initiatives emerged out of cooperation between ATOs and small-scale producers in the late 1980s (the Dutch group, Max Havelaar, in 1988 was a frontrunner), and the mainstreaming of certification followed less than a decade later, with corporate entities and conventional retailers such as Starbucks entering the marketplace in the early 2000s (Jaffee and Howard 2010; Nicholls and Opal 2005, p. 10; 20).⁴

The first umbrella certification agency, Fairtrade Labeling Organizations International (FLO, now Fairtrade International), was established in 1997, to coordinate national fair trade certification initiatives (Fridell 2004). Fairtrade International certified products were exchanged under a system of guarantees for the producer, including a long-term trading relationship, a minimum guaranteed price and other economic benefits (which included credit prior to harvest, infrastructure development assistance, a price premium, and so on) (Nicholls and Opal 2005). This focus on the producer generated a higher price for fair trade certified goods, which was promoted as a way for producers to recover the cost of production and earn a living wage. Because fair trade relies on the purchase of commodities at a slightly higher price than their free trade counterparts, ethical purchasing on the part of consumers was invoked by the sellers of the certified product (Raynolds 2002).

⁴ Original ATO purchases of fair trade goods attempted to be 100% fair trade. In the fair trade coffee marketplace, a number of coffee bean purchasers that have been involved since the 1980s still attempt to purchase 100% of their beans at fair trade premiums contrary to their mainstream counterparts. Compare 2008 purchases of fair trade certified coffee: Equal Exchange and Cooperative Coffees at 100% versus Starbucks at 5% and Nestle at .0025% (Howard and Jaffee 2013, p. 77).

Over time, the focus of what fair trade certification was and who it was for became mired in the framing of a “southern producer subject” and a “northern consumer subject.” In order to understand the creation of fair trade subjects, it is important to examine the discourses of development that underlie it. The purported connections engendered through fair trade purchases are predicated on a bifurcation of the globe, which places consumers in the “global north” and producers in the “global south.” Binaries such as these facilitate the creation of a “global north” subject who is providing “assistance” to a “global south” subject, who is “in need” (Slater 1993, 1997) and allows such subject-to-subject relations to be viewed as natural and expected. Through this naturalization, the global north-south view of the world is utilized unquestioningly and, moreover, is championed through the discursive creation of north-south subjects. The Fair Trade USA website discusses the fair trade premium that is provided through consumer purchases as “key in breaking the cycle of poverty in the Global South and lifting these people up instead of keeping them down” (2010, np). Such discourse encourages a colonial-style commodities trade (cf. Shreck 2002) while dismissing the colonial and neo-colonial processes that created such conditions in the first place.

The global north-south division of the world was made fashionable through the Brandt Report (1980), which drew an imaginary line that divided the world between what was constructed as the “industrialized north” and the “impoverished south” (the Brandt Line in Figure 1). A division that was predicated on the role of a “helping north” (Vanolo 2010, p. 29) and understandings of a capitalist (and soon to be neoliberal) style development, the Brandt Report had an impact similar to President Truman’s 1949 inauguration address that introduced “underdeveloped areas,” which were inhabited by people whose “economic life is primitive and stagnant” and who were viewed as “a threat to prosperous areas.” In Truman’s speech, whole areas of the world became “underdeveloped” in the space of a few sentences; this framing had the result of institutionalizing US and European strategies of development (Escobar 1995). The Brandt Report provided support for postwar development paradigms that were deployed by policymakers, and although the Brandt Line was not immediately adopted by scholars, it later became important in conversations centered on development and globalization (Dirlik 2007). As Murphy (2013) noted, the global north-south easily replaced the anachronistic “Third World” and negative “underdeveloped or non-industrialized” approach to dividing the world. Indeed, I

argue that such a deterministic geographical division of the world makes easier the forgetting of geopolitical and geoeconomic conditions that precipitated the project of economic development.

[Figure 1 about here]

To this end, certification was branded on the terminology of the global north-south and has been overwhelmingly adopted and deployed by scholars focused on fair trade. A review of the fair trade literature in the social sciences reveals heavy use of the narrative. The quotes below reflect a sample of scholarly work on fair trade that relies on the global north-south to situate participants in fair trade networks.⁵

Fair trade was originally designed as a system explicitly for the benefit of small farmers; in the *global South*, this meant marginalized peasant producers of tropical export commodities (Jaffee 2010, p. 277).

...fair trade is a transnational form of boycott squarely situated in the uneven globalization of the current world order that uses the buying power of consumers mainly in rich industrialized countries to improve the incomes and working conditions of producers in the *global South* (Schmelzer 2010, p. 222).

...the networks create an expansive ethics of care that specifically seeks to connect consumers and producers, and more generally the *global North* and *South* by overcoming and, in effect, shrinking, physical, psychological, and cultural distances (cf. Mansfield, 2003) (Goodman 2004, p. 906).

⁵ Emphasis added. (cf. Bacon 2010; Becchetti and Huybrechts 2007; Blowfield 1999; Blowfield and Dolan 2010; Bryant and Goodman 2004; Davies et al. 2009; Dolan 2010; C. Fisher 2007; E. Fisher 2009; J. Fisher 2010; Fridell 2004; Hudson and Hudson 2003; Hutchens 2011; Jaffee et al. 2004; Levi and Linton 2003; Low and Davenport 2005; Lyon 2006, 2011; Newhouse 2011; Nicholls and Opal 2005; Reynolds 2009; Reynolds et al. 2004, 2007; Renard 1999; Shreck 2005; Taylor 2005)

This movement seeks to empower producers in the *global South* through the provision of better prices, stable market links, and development resources. In the *global North*, Fair Trade seeks to promote responsible consumption and provide shoppers with socially and environmentally friendly products (Raynolds 2012, p. 276).

The adoption of this narrative is problematic, not only due to its imprecision, neglect of disparities within countries and inability to explain the experience of countries (or peoples) that fall in “the middle” (Murphy 2013, p. 140),⁶ but additionally due to the inattention to the power relations that are inherent in it. These power relations play out in development discourses and paradigms (Escobar 1995, 2004), as well as within the marketplace (Dolan 2010). Moreover, they are masked by economic development strategies such as fair trade, which reinforce existing hierarchies. Scholars have been attentive to the imbalance of power in fair trade certification, yet the use of the north-south framing inadvertently reinforces the very problems scholars seek to expose. If the world is divided “naturally” by hemispheres, than it is rather inevitable that the focus (and praise) should fall on so-called alternatives, such as fair trade, which are viewed as bridging the divide or making fuzzy the line that separates consumers and producers, the north and the south, the “developed” and the “undeveloped.”

A “consuming north” and a “producing south”

⁶ Indeed, many studies assess consumer behavior within countries of the so-called “global north,” and producer benefits in the so-called “global south,” this reinforces the problematic binary of a consuming north and a producing south (for exceptions see work on domestic fair trade: Brown and Getz 2008; Jaffee et al. 2004). In addition, both Jaffee (2007) and Fridell (2007a) have critiqued the labor practices of companies selling fair trade coffee, largely focusing on the US and Canada, drawing attention to disparities in-place in the so-called “global north” further fracturing a bi-modal separation of consumer and producer subjects.

My family uses fairly traded staples such as coffee, tea, and rice daily...Usually, we use the products from their original packaging rather than placing in storage containers. In this way, we have a constant reminder of the source of our food. Looking at the picture of Mario Fernandez and reading of the transformation in his family makes me feel very good indeed about the experience of coffee making and drinking. [...] Having met in person producers like Mario, I wonder if they fully realize what they are doing for us in terms of joy and confirming our own humanity (Gould 2003, p. 343).

In his auto-ethnography of the consumer-producer relations of fair trade, Nicholas Gould argued that consuming certified products mitigates the “twin ills” of capitalism: poverty and unchecked consumption (2003, p. 341). Yet the passage above speaks volumes about who the intended beneficiaries of fair trade are. What might sound to many of Gould’s contemporaries as an accurate portrayal of exchange within the fair trade marketplace—one that engenders social relations between a consumer and a producer—is a narrative that masks power relations. The purchasing of a fair trade product conjures an image of production that is frozen in time, while simultaneously opening up a moral economy of consumption (Fridell 2007a; Lyon 2006). These dynamics are evident in contemporary fair trade marketing strategies. The recently re-branded, third-party certifier, Fair Trade USA inspires fair trade consumption by reminding consumers that their “everyday purchase can improve an *entire* community’s day-to-day lives” (2012, np, emphasis added). This concentration tends to move away from the roots of ATO-led fair trade certification, which—in conversation with small-scale producers—traditionally focused on the ability of the producer to have a secure source of income as well as endogenous, effective, and appropriate social/economic development.

The sale of fair trade goods relied on a message of consumer-producer connectivity and linkages of geographically disparate places—the north and south. Indeed, without a solid brand identity at its inception (Nicholls and Opal 2005, p. 158), fair trade products, such as coffee, had to rely on creative packaging. Packaging contained tasting notes, country-of-origin information and additionally, information about a farmer or community that produced the beans. Laura Reynolds argues that through such measures, fair trade certified goods “arrive at the point of consumption replete with information regarding the social and environmental conditions under

which they were produced and traded” (2002, p. 415). The knowledge embedded in the packaging was designed to close the gap between the consumer and the producer, the north and south, unveiling the conditions of production and creating a direct trade relationship. In this way, certification was discussed as a means to connect producers and consumers (cf. Gould 2003; Levi and Linton 2003; Nicholls and Opal 2005; Raynolds 2000, 2002, 2012). There is an ongoing, and increasingly stalemated, debate in the literature over such linkages and the commodity fetish. Many scholars have emphasized that the commodity fetish has been broken down through fair trade consumer-producer linkages, which they argue, unmask the conditions of production.⁷ It is argued that certification demystifies the conditions of production and establishes social relations between consumer and producer (rather than between things; see Marx 1977 [1867]) through ethical consumerism. Raynolds contends that such links “span the North/South divide,” the certification label itself forging the bond (2002, p. 404, 411). Although there is always an intermediary in such economic relations—even the third-party certifier disrupts the link (Guthman 2004; Mutersbaugh 2005)—scholars appear to be concerned with an imaginary of consumer-producer linkages constructed through solidarity and shared values. However, Gavin Fridell argues that consumer “knowledge of fair trade and the lives of producer communities in the South is confined largely to advertising media, and it is not based on direct and personal ties but is mediated by the market” (2007a, p. 90–91). Similarly, drawing from Susanne Freidberg (2003a), Julie Guthman notes that as a tool to communicate production practices to consumers fair trade labels still fall short of unmasking the social and economic conditions of production; “the consumer is left simply to trust that the label speaks for itself” (2004, p. 513).⁸ My project here is not to enter this debate, but to draw out the division between consumer/producer, north/south, developed/undeveloped. Through rendering visible to a “consuming north” a particular set of conditions in a “producing south” north-south subjects are created. Certification itself is based in standardizing and unveiling the conditions of production

⁷ cf. Bryant and Goodman 2004; Elson 1999; Hudson and Hudson 2003; Jaffee et al. 2004; Lyon 2006; Raynolds 2000, 2002, 2012.

⁸ Some scholars (see Bryant and Goodman 2004; Varul 2008) contends that fair trade certification acts as both a way to defetishize commodity relations and commodify consumer-producer linkages, or otherness (Goodman 2004).

and makes available information about how and where commodities are produced, yet through the label and the generalization of a “producing south” certification renders the conditions of production normalized and static even as they are consistently being negotiated.⁹

Fair trade, as a social movement, inspired organizations to develop a market model that was based on empowering producers. To achieve this goal, organizations and producers worked together to create networks, which enabled more direct sale of products. Such products received a label from a third-party certifier. This certification label was meant to assist consumers with understanding that there were certain standards for the conditions of trade. Beyond the certification symbol, photographs and stories on product packaging were used to further engage the consumer. This type of ethical labeling was designed to educate consumers. What it has achieved is the creation of subject relations where wealthier subjects in a “consuming north” rely on certification labels to locate development subjects in the “producing south” (cf. West 2010). Take for example Fair Trade USA’s claim that “certified products carry the Fair Trade Certified label, which helps consumers to purchase their way to a better world, simply by looking for the label on the products they buy” (2012, np). Fair trade certification has shifted the due diligence of consumers seeking out products that were ethically or sustainably sourced, to placing the burden on the producer to comply with production standards that are now demanded by consumers in their pursuit of a “better world.” The “bucket boy” of Fair Trade USA and the labels of other groups have become a brand that consumers now identify with. The brand identifies standardized practices, but such standards are applied to an almost ageographical “global south”; and how those practices are situated, carried out, and mandated in place, whether they have changed, who they are extended to, and so on, is hidden behind the label. The claims of third-party certifiers such as Fair Trade USA put the fair trade brand at the center, removing the producer from the equation and rendering them a southern-development subject. Through this framing the conditions of production, the politics of certification, and scholarly research agendas are rendered static, cementing in time and place a systematic need for assistance to “global south” producer-subjects and an assessment of the effectiveness of such assistance.

⁹ As Goodman points out, livelihood struggles become fetishized (2004, p. 896) and farmers take on the mantle of a particular producer-subject.

In 2011, Fair Trade USA split with the umbrella organization Fairtrade International to promote different, weaker standards of certification (Zinn 2012). Critically, these standards allow coffee plantations to be certified for the first time and for the certification of packaged products that have a minimum of 10% fair trade ingredients (Neuman 2011).¹⁰ A controversial move, there are a host of questions raised by this change. However, the analytically interesting question is not what motivates third-party certifiers (e.g., predictions on increased revenue), but how fair trade is experienced by consumers and producers, who are stratified as subjects of the north and south. The terms of fair trade have changed much in the same way that organic standards have, a process articulated early on by Buck et al. as a way of “regulating of meaning,” (1997, p. 5; see also Guthman 1998; Jaffee and Howard 2010). The meaning embedded in fair trade certification was built on a fabrication of consumer-producer connection and direct trade values, is now “regulated” and normalized. Fair trade may have originally been posited as a way to create linkages between producers and consumers, while exposing the relations of production-consumption, nevertheless, the branding of certified products serves to continuously make and remake an impoverished “southern-subject” “in need” of a wealthy “northern-subject.” Certification standards have transformed to exist around the type of production that consumers are compelled by a label to support, rather than the types of production systems that may assist producers in creating endogenous and material improvement in their households and communities. Re-branded Fair Trade USA promotes “fair trade for all” (2012, np). Paradoxically, this slogan implies a fair trade that can be anything to anyone.

Emplacing certification

Framing certification in the binary of the global north-south has facilitated an imagined geography of the south that fails to take into account how such spaces are demarcated. As a result, such characterizations have foreclosed opportunities to question this segregation of space

¹⁰ Although fair trade certification, at its inception, was originally restricted to small-producer cooperatives it grew to include plantation-produced commodities that were deemed unable to be sourced in large quantities from small producers (tea and bananas for example).

and open up new and critically important lines of inquiry. As noted above, discussions of fair trade are largely couched in analysis of certification as a tool of economic development for producers who have long been marginalized. In this vein, the theme of “trade not aid” is used to distance the price premium on certified goods from charitable acts and previous decades of economic development assistance (cf. Nicholls and Opal 2005; Taylor 2005). This discourse additionally provides a distraction from the inherent power dynamic, which perpetuates a “needy” subject of the “global south” vis-à-vis their “wealthy” “global north” counterparts. Scholarship assessing “trade not aid” is largely focused on trade as an improvement in producer livelihood; indeed, it took some years before a critical view locating the impact on producers and producer communities was published (cf. Getz and Shreck 2006; Jaffee 2007; Shreck 2005).¹¹ Reminiscent of structural adjustment policies tied to development aid, Sarah Lyon more recently argued that fair trade certification standards tied to a price premium have become a creative way to intervene and “fix” farming systems (2011, p. 152). This has important geopolitical consequences as territories—the fields and workspaces of small producers—which were previously either ignored or unregulated by the state, have become important spaces of standardization and economic development through the marketplace. By wearing the moniker of “trade,” economic development programs tied to certification for “southern subjects” are able to masquerade as differently designed than previous post-colonial aid projects. Scholarship tends to be focused on whether development is working or if it echoes a colonial past, yet it might be enriched—and illuminate new territorializations—if scholars abandoned the north-south binary and considered a place-based geopolitics of certification.

Consistent with new forms of neoliberal governance, certification of goods became a way for civil society to take on a state-like role in social and economic development in spaces long-ignored by the state (cf. Dolan 2010; Fridell 2006; Guthman 2007; Lyon 2011; West 2010). Promoted as a step away from economic intervention and neocolonial control, participation in the market is viewed as a method of empowering “southern-subjects.” The neoliberal discourse of empowerment has been incredibly important in facilitating debates over whether or not fair

¹¹ These first critiques addressed the effectiveness of fair trade as a tool of economic development and considered whether it calibrated with the “deep ruts” of previous imperial intervention (as suggested by Friedberg 2003b, p. 98).

trade is “working” for producers (Dolan 2010; cf. Jaffee 2007). Consistent with postwar development paradigms, systems of certification are yet another project of development designed to assist an “impoverished south.” The geopolitical framing of certification initiatives as trade between the global north-south creates a space in which discussions tend to criticize the effectiveness of development, rather than the locus, discouraging different critical work that could be done.

The promotion of fair trade certification as an income-earning strategy has brought spaces of production under the scrutiny of outside actors, while simultaneously emplacing a “will to improve” (see Li 2007) in communities where certified products originate. Producers agree to external, universal production standards and requirements for community development in exchange for certification. In accepting such standards for production, producers fall under what Dolan terms “regimes of accountability” (2010, p. 34) and through certification, become normalized as subjects of the “global south,” removed from their place-based context. For example, in order to gain access to an international market and receive a price premium for the production of coffee, small-scale producers must become part of (or form) a democratic cooperative, the cooperative must pay for an application for certification, and they must also assume the cost of yearly audits by a third-party certifier. Furthermore, under the requirements for certification there are a number of additional stipulations, in some cases, a portion of the price premium that is gained by producers through the sale of their product(s) must be applied to community development (e.g., construction of potable water systems).

Standards are mandates for producers (and the middle-person groups, which import, buy, or add-value to certified products), which not only create structures of governance for behavior and define who a “southern-subject” is, but also normalize control in spaces of production, such as farmers’ fields. In her work with fair trade coffee farmers, Lyon notes that:

As defined by FLO, small-scale farmers cultivate fewer than three hectares of coffee, harvest between 1,000 and 3,000 pounds of green coffee a year, are not dependent on hired labor, and manage their farms with their own and their families’ labor. Despite the emphasis on family farms, FLO prohibits both the employment of children under the age of 15 and work conditions that may “jeopardize schooling”... (FLO 2007 in Lyon 2011, p. 14)

In an updated version of the “Standards for Small-Producers” FLO (2011) articulated prohibited items as well as systems of training and control for the use of fertilizers and pesticides, the maintenance of biodiversity and natural buffer zones, soil and water conservation, the use of GMOs, as well as the foraging and use of non-cultivated forest-life.¹² Among other mandates, they further require the creation and reporting of at least one community development project, called the “Fair Trade Development Plan.” This plan must “improve the lives” of the producers and must have an activity “to maintain or improve sustainable production practices” (2011, np). The subject, thusly defined, managed, and emplaced in the “impoverished global south” is bounded both materially and discursively to a new locus of territorial control in their spaces of production. Through certification, the spaces of production and the spaces of living become subject to standards and bounded by them. Despite consistent pressure for change and more inclusiveness from producer organizations the certification system gives agencies a modicum of control over producer territory and livelihood; they can mandate what can and cannot be grown in certified fields, how the certified product is produced, who contributes to the production, what process is used, how many labor hours can be spent, and so on. Although mediated by the market and not the state, certification remains a regulatory mechanism that both discursively constructs and attempts to “fix” the “global south.”

As a geographer, I am interested in how these power relationships play out over space, specifically how development policies and subject relations predicated on a naturalized “global south” become written into the landscapes of farmers’ fields and other spaces of production. As ÓTuathail (1996) and other scholars (cf. Agnew 1999, 2010) have maintained, territories are no longer the purview of states alone, control and management of space has become increasingly mediated by global flows and economic relationships. There are zones of economic wealth and there are zones of poverty. Again, the dividing of the world into the global north-south demarcates these zones in a particular way and creates subjects that are “in need of

¹² It should be noted that FLO has producer representation on its board and the General Assembly (also, the percentage of producer representatives has increased in the last decade) and in all documentation states that standards are created in consultation with producers; however, there is still a strong imbalance in representation (see Renard and Loconto 2013, p. 56).

development” and those who are “developed.” Economic development and the measures to undertake it have long been used to legitimate control of spaces within and between states; it would seem that—consistent with other observations of post-colonial development projects—fair trade certification serves as a new source of legitimation.

Although scholars who have conducted research with fair trade coffee farmers agree that they are better off than conventional producers due to increased income and access to credit, most note that fair trade producers are only slightly better off and that the increase in income comes with a significant burden through having to uphold certification and community development standards (cf. Jaffee 2007; Lyon 2011; Naylor 2012). In seeking certification producers are able to gain access to institutions and information that, in many cases, they have never had access to before; however, Lyon (2011) and others (cf. Dolan 2010; Mutersbuagh 2005), have argued that certification creates new management roles and power relationships where none previously existed. In this way certification and scholarship assessing its effectiveness serves to construct southern-subjects. Thus, the “southern producer” is developed and managed by third-party certifiers and consumers to become the empowered producer featured in the picture that adorns fair trade product packaging. Such standards maintain the spaces of production while making—externally assessed—livelihood improvements elusive. One of the great paradoxes of fair trade as a strategy of economic development is that although producers selling certified products are now perhaps able to better maintain their livelihoods, they are rarely able to improve them (Varul 2008); southern-subjects must remain normalized and naturalized as subjects of development. Exaggerating the potency of “trade not aid” in empowering producers assists in creating a glossy veneer for new forms of development and territorial control.

Alternative possibilities

Eliminating the dichotomous framing of fair trade certified producers may facilitate approaches to scholarship and/or the creation of certification standards that do more than recognize (and critique) fair trade as neoliberal-style development. The recognition of the promises and problems with certification has built an impressive body of literature, yet it might be viewed as

almost apologetic—highlighting the power dynamics that are embedded in the global market and certified trade while arguing that certification is a potentially appropriate strategy for ameliorating such inequities. Fair trade has been articulated by a number of scholars as an alternative to the neoliberal marketplace or, at a minimum, a trading relationship that opposes it (cf. Jaffee et al. 2004; Le Mare 2008; Nicholls and Opal 2005; Raynolds 2000, 2002; Taylor 2005). Critically, in the marketplace, the fair trade certification seal impresses upon consumers the notion that a “just” trading relationship has been achieved. The discourse of “in and against the market” has provided an illusion of an alternative economic imaginary. Josh Fisher argues that this imaginary has been a productive way to examine problems with neoliberal trade; still it simultaneously has perpetuated the myth that fair trade somehow stands outside and acts against the “mainstream” market (2010, p. 3). As fair trade has facilitated critique and debate regarding the power relations within the capitalist marketplace, so too can criticisms of fair trade be used to re-imagine a system of trade that operates differently, one that is not trapped in an economic system dictated by a nebulous “north” and made available to a faceless “south.” Contemporary debates over whether certification is a tool for disrupting capitalism tend to reinforce this logic through a non-problematized global north-south framing; a more productive project could focus on how people live and work within differing systems of exchange. In this section, I focus on the new producer-led, regionally based labeling standard, the Small Producers’ Symbol (Símbolo de los Pequeños Productores-SPP) to draw out an example of how we might think differently about certification outside of the north-south framing and neoliberal economic imaginaries.

It is increasingly important to move beyond the more simplified logic of “southern producers” accessing and/or transgressing neoliberal “northern markets” and attempt to see the extent to which opportunities for alternatives exist (and their limitations).¹³ The recent changes to certification standards (directed by Fair Trade USA) led some small-scale producer cooperatives, along with their partner groups to withdraw from Fair Trade USA. This is an important point here because although a set of producers are consulted as part of the certification process, the majority of producers have traditionally had very little input into the standards of certification

¹³ This also opens up potential new lines of empirical inquiry into how farmers deploy alternative economic imaginaries even as they mobilize under US and European certification standards of production and sale and in international markets more broadly.

(Lyon 2007, 2011; Smith and Loker 2012) and when consulted, their standpoint is often not taken into account (Renard and Loconto 2013). The imbalance in standard-setting has been long recognized by producer organizations and the regional Latin American and Caribbean Network of Small Fairtrade Producers (CLAC) have, in the last decade, sought to challenge US- and European-based control over producer activities and decision-making (Fruendt 2009; Renard and Loconto 2013). To this end, the Small Producers' Symbol (Símbolo de los Pequeños Productores-SPP) certification system was initiated in 2006, and finalized in 2010, as an initiative of CLAC to create producer-led standards for production and trade (tusimbolo.org 2012). The first of its kind, the SPP began certifying groups in 2011, and uses standards for production that are created by small producers and that attempt to address the socio-economic issues that they face on a daily basis. Focused on strengthening existing production practices, local economies, and sustainability, the SPP is positioned to create more inclusive exchanges and solidarity networks across the globe.

Viewing the aims of this new initiative demonstrates very different ways of thinking about the subjectivities of fair trade. The regionally based SPP was generated via asking questions about how existing, place-based production systems could be used to create networks of exchange that were grounded in personal relationships and it is here that the divide between fair trade as a system of certification and fair trade as a movement is most acutely visible. The SPP is focused on creating solidarity networks and adding value locally, a point that is important to gain understanding of what trade means to a number of different actors, not solely “southern producers” *or* “northern consumers.” In assessing standards for economic relations the SPP is attempting, through dialogue, to create direct relations and dignified living—this is articulated as an economy of trust (tusimbolo.org 2010). As Renard and Loconto recently argued in a piece focused on the power relations in standard-setting, the SPP standards are “...overtly political, consisting of a code of principles and inalienable values defined through consensus among the small producers” (2013, p. 53). Further, I argue that the reflexive form of standard-setting of the SPP assists with shifting away from certification discourses and scholarship that are couched in the north-south binary and creates new ways of participating in economic activities and performing economic identities that are focused on place-based ways of living, instead of as “southern development producer-subjects.” This stands in contrast to the production of a “needy southern subject” who requires exchange within the neoliberal marketplace or, to the creation of

a certification method designed to empower “southern producers” to be more akin to their “global north” counterparts, consumers.

Fair trade certification is an important mirror to reflect the social relations of exchange in the conventional marketplace, highlighting the power relationships inherent in them (cf. Bacon 2010; Fisher, C. 2007; Fisher, J. 2010; Jaffee 2007; Reynolds 2002; Taylor 2005). Yet at the same time, arguing that certification works “in and against market,” tends to render invisible the possibility of alternatives. Initiatives such as the SPP provide a different point of access to the market and envision a different type of economy; and it is here that as scholars we can benefit from stepping outside the north-south approach that limits questions to whether economic development via fair trade is “working” for small producers.¹⁴ In some ways the SPP and CLAC challenge the north-south divide, through a bottom-up, small producer, regional approach.¹⁵ If scholarship can be used to complicate or even step outside the dichotomous north-south framing, this could potentially reduce the dependence on development-centered economic “progress” and facilitate conceptualizations of alternatives and foster discussions of an ethic of care in trade. If, for example we take a regional approach—as is suggested by Murphy (2013)—the SPP is demonstrative, a system created by and for the members of CLAC. Indeed, in stepping outside the north-south binary different scalar approaches (local, regional, national) are crucial for facilitating more nuanced understandings of economy and so-called “economic development.” The SPP is one example; however, there are countless other arenas for examining how fair trade certified economic exchange is operating that might be approached anew.

Conclusion

¹⁴ Christopher Bacon (2010) notes that the *movement* to make trade fair is still an important place for asking questions about what constitutes an alternative form of trade relationship.

¹⁵Yet, at the same time as the SPP makes attempts to distance certification strategies from contemporary neoliberal development models it is still operating within a neoliberal marketplace, which makes it even more important to consider the place-based politics of certification when asking questions about how to make trade more fair.

In 2012, in response to the re-branding of Fair Trade USA, a small coffee-roasting cooperative in the US declared “Fair Trade™ to be dead,” and also proclaimed “long live fair trade” (Earley 2012, np). This paper is not an argument against the existence of fair trade certification. As noted throughout, fair trade has opened up a critical space for a number of important debates and provided a lens through which to view power relations. And I reiterate, researchers have found that systems of certification have made changes in the lives of producers (cf. Bacon 2008; Jaffee 2007; Ronchi 2002). Although launching a critique, Lyon (2011) is careful to remind readers that fair trade has positively impacted the economic well-being of many coffee producers, in some cases saving lives. However, ultimately these examinations continue to evaluate certification on the basis of standards that remain mired in the discourse of economic development. Long-standing debates over certification seem at an impasse. The more intriguing question is not whether fair trade certification succumbs or resists the drawbacks of neoliberal economic development, but how can we use fair trade as a way to understand and reformulate alternative imaginaries not predicated on a consuming north and a producing south?¹⁶ The reliance on “consumer–producer linkages,” “trade not aid,” and “within and against the market” succeeds in reifying development subjectivities, which forecloses other imaginaries.¹⁷

The progression of fair trade since its inception, as well as recent changes in the terms of certification require rethinking, reanalyzing, and producing more nuanced accounts of fair trade, which step-away from dichotomous, tired, and worn debates and instead reflect on the position of actors in place and in the market, rather than as global north-south development subjects. In abandoning dichotomous framings, which are tied to neoliberal understandings of economic development, scholarship focused on fair trade is poised to contribute significantly to understandings of how, where and why economic actors interact with and attempt to challenge progressively unjust systems. The implications in conducting research outside of the north-south

¹⁶ Josh Fisher in his work on the meanings of fair trade concludes that fair trade is a “debate,” which opens up space for conversations about what values (outside of exchange value) matter in trade (2010, p. 352).

¹⁷ Catherine Dolan noted that fair trade discourses are so well incorporated within the neoliberal market system that the possible creation of alternatives or more just exchange relations between the “north-south” is significantly reduced (2010, p. 41).

economic development dichotomy may assist with unhinging what Catherine Dolan articulates as the “moral authority of Fairtrade,” which she argues “silences critique and allows for a mystification of the functions that Fairtrade performs for the political economy of neoliberalism” (2010, p. 41). Indeed, I suggest that the questions we ask should not be bound to whether fair trade is working for development subjects, but how can it be understood differently and outside economic development binaries and neoliberal economic imaginaries.

The declaration “long live fair trade” is an incitement of the movement to make trade fair, to assess who the beneficiaries of fair trade are, and to examine the power relations within certification in new ways. Overlooked in the scramble to link consumer with producer and develop the so-called “undeveloped” are the place-based nuances that can assist scholars in thinking outside the current debates. The discourses of trade in fair trade certification are branded, normalized, and have been put to use by a number of different groups in the interest of fair trade subjects. This normalization has been furthered and complicated through being unquestioningly subsumed under the narrative of the global north-south. That “Fair Trade™ is dead” may be valid, yet, as scholars it is important to determine what spaces are opened up through this encounter. To support this endeavor, both in fair trade scholarship and beyond, the umbrella narrative of the global north-south must be countered, deconstructed, and rethought.

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Figure 1. The Brandt Line dividing “North” from “South.”