Justice at a Price: Regulation and Alienation in the Global Economy

This article examines the normative principles that underlie efforts to regulate the global coffee market at different points in the global division of labor. I focus on three forms of regulation: local violence against coffee farmers in Honduras, fair trade consumerism, and international regulatory treaties. By comparing the local politics of Honduran coffee production to global forms of consumer activism, I bring contemporary debates about economic justice under a single analytic lens. I suggest that systematic changes in the relationship between states and nations have led alienated citizens to develop new forms of regulation outside the boundaries of the state, and that coffee frequently serves as a metaphor through which people come to terms with their place in the global economy. This metaphor ultimately rests on an alienated representation of the global system that limits the political potential of these regulatory strategies.

For more than a century, governments in advanced capitalist countries have used regulatory law to “domesticate” pure market forces in the interest of national societies. In recent years, the realities of the global division of labor have outgrown the regulatory structures of nation-states, and no supranational agency enforces standards of economic justice at the global level. The imbalance between high normative standards of justice and weak institutional structures produces discomfort among citizens of advanced countries who rely on mass-produced commodities for their livelihood, but who have grown accustomed to the idea that “fair capitalism” is not a contradiction in terms: Who knows what nefarious forms of exploitation are happening on the other side of the world? And, even if one did know, what could be done? In an environment where existing political institutions seem incapable of adapting the standards of the modern class compromise to the global division of labor, concerned citizens formulate and enforce normative principles of economic justice outside the boundaries of the nation-state.

The rising popularity of “fair trade” is the best example of this phenomenon. Fair trade is a non-governmental process that certifies and labels commodities that have been produced under “socially just” conditions, according to the standards of an international auditing agency, the International Fairtrade Labeling Organization (IFLO). Through the fair trade system, consumers enforce a transnational standard of economic justice by paying a premium for products that have been certified as “fair.” Consumers intend to effect political change by consumer choice, using a
non-governmental auditing body and market decisions, rather than legal mechanisms, to enforce standards of justice. In effect, “fair trade” is a voluntary form of market regulation, in which a transnational group of consumer-citizens enforces a price floor for a commodity and maintains labor standards by choice. In this sense, they perform the regulatory function of nation-states in an essentially stateless environment.¹

In general, “fair” certification for coffee guarantees that farmers (or grower cooperatives) have been paid a minimum price of $1.26 per pound of unroasted coffee ($1.41 for certified organic coffee) and that workers are treated fairly on farms. The standards of fairness are developed by unelected experts, and are published in handbooks that read like legal codes, albeit without a state-based system of law enforcement.² Some fair trade coffee roasters buy directly from farmer cooperatives, while others buy from large-scale import/export operations that have purchased coffee already certified and labeled as “fair trade” by a third-party auditing agency.³ This process is similar to organic certification, although instead of certifying ecologically healthy practices, they are auditing social health, as it were.

With the addition of a “fair trade certified” label, “fairness” becomes an attribute of the commodity, similar to its country of origin, flavor characteristics, or caffeine content. In the past five years, fair trade has undergone phenomenal growth. In 2005, 44 million pounds of fair trade coffee were imported into the United States alone, 75 percent from Latin American countries. This constitutes about 2 percent of the total coffee sold in the United States, and fair trade’s market share has grown by 1,000 percent since 2000.⁴ While still on the fringes, fair trade is moving toward the mainstream.

The current popularity of fair trade is especially significant because coffee, the commodity upon which the fair trade movement has focused, was among the world’s most heavily regulated commodities markets from 1962 to 1989. During that time, the global coffee trade was controlled by the International Coffee Agreement (ICA), an international treaty that established national production quotas and price controls for all countries that exported or imported coffee.⁵ Coffee thus provides an instructive example of the shift from international market regulation to transnational market regulation. In the former, the nation-state remains the basic unit of political activity. In the later, the nation-state disappears from view, replaced by transnational NGOs and the buying practices of individual consumers.

In this essay, I will focus on the forms of political subjectivity that underlie contemporary attempts to regulate the global coffee market.⁶ I use the term regulation in an unusually broad sense, referring to the ways in which a defined social group controls economic behavior in the name of collective principles. In this sense, regulation could include both customary and legal precepts—practices as diverse as cultural prohibitions against usury (Nelson 1969), forms of alternative finance (Maurer 2005), cultural ideas of the “moral economy” (Scott 1976), or leveling mechanisms like “image of the limited good” (Foster 1965). In this discussion I focus on three forms of regulation: local-level violence against coffee farmers, fair trade consumerism, and
international regulatory treaties like the ICA. The specific normative principles that underlie regulatory strategies vary greatly, but a comparative analysis of these principles enables a critical understanding of contemporary forms of political subjectivity in relation to global political economic forces. Through ethnographic description, I will draw an analogy between attempts to regulate the coffee market at different points in the global division of labor. I suggest that different social groups face similar ideological struggles in their attempts to conceptualize and enforce “economic justice” in the contemporary global economy, which seems too complex and indeterminate to regulate or control.7

**Coffee Under the Radar**

Building 45 in the cargo area of JFK Airport is, aesthetically, about as far as one can get from a Starbucks.8 It looks like a warehouse on the outside, and the inside has the feel of a decrepit public school—lots of fluorescent lights, tiled walls, and squeaky floors obsessively buffed by bored-looking janitors. The building houses Port Authority Police and U.S. Customs officials, and holstered pistols far outnumber laptops. A yellow sign outside the building advertises Warm Winds Coffee, a glorified breakroom on the building’s first floor, where Tony Chan sells some of the world’s most interesting coffee.

Behind a door simply marked “Coffee,” Tony sells his product for $1.25 per cup, one size only. The coffee is grown on Tony’s farm in La Quebrada, Honduras, a small town of 4,000 people in the mountainous center of the country.9 A Taiwanese immigrant to the United States who became a coffee farmer after being fired from McDonalds, Tony grows his coffee in Honduras, ships his coffee to the United States, roasts it himself in the JFK cargo area, and sells it to airport workers from three small outposts, one of which is managed by his wife. Tony’s coffee is specialty-grade, grown at high altitude and under shade, and meticulously managed at all stages of the production process. He has one paid employee in the United States, a full time field boss in Honduras, and serves the coffee to customers himself, seven days a week.

I first met Tony in La Quebrada late in my fieldwork. Beginning in 2001, I had heard rumors about a “Chinese” coffee farmer (called *el chino*) living up in the mountains who had supposedly made millions selling his product in the United States. Given the fact that this rumor was told amidst the most severe coffee crisis in the past half-century, I doubted its veracity. It was unlikely that anyone was getting rich off coffee, because the market price was below the production cost of coffee. At first, I chalked the rumor up to small-town jealousy and the myth of easy money in the United States.10 There was clearly an element of xenophobia or racism to the rumors, blaming one of the community’s only ethnic outsiders for exploitative business practices.

I also doubted the rumor that Tony exported his own coffee; it is rather difficult for a coffee farmer to obtain an export license from the Honduran government. They usually must work through several established companies, selling to a
miller–processor or an exporter. Later, I learned that the story was not entirely false. Tony did grow, transport, roast, and retail his own coffee, but he was not getting rich. Far from it. He barely broke even.

Tony is a hardened entrepreneur. He became a coffee farmer after being fired from McDonalds in 1993 after 18 years of employment. He began working at the restaurant at 16, making minimum wage. He worked his way up the ladder at McDonalds, eventually becoming a regional supervisor in Queens. He hoped to one day own a branch of the franchise himself, but he was fired, replaced by a younger employee as a way of cutting costs. As he puts it,

I was making too much money for them. I had been to Hamburger University [a McDonalds training center] twice. I knew everything. How many napkins to order, how many ketchup packets we needed. I had it down to a science. But I made too much money, man. They threw me out and hired some kid out of college making 20 thousand a year.

Tony’s wife, a Honduran woman he had met at McDonalds, heard about a coffee farm for sale in her home country. Out of work but fueled by a mix of ambition and bitterness, Tony used all of the family’s savings and much of his pension to buy the property. At first, Tony knew nothing about coffee, and viewed his farm merely as a way to turn a profit. He now seems to make a constant effort to repress his sentimentality and view his livelihood with the cold objectivity of a shrewd businessman, but the romantic side often shows through. He tells me, “You don’t know what being a farmer is like until you do it. You live and die with your plants. If they die, my family dies. I didn’t know anything about coffee, but now I love my farm. It’s my life.” But then he catches himself, and says, “Man, I just want to grow this stuff, bring it to the States, and sell it. That’s it.”

The romantic side takes over while we walk through his farm, early one morning during the harvest. Set in a beautiful cloud forest where the temperature rarely rises above 75 degrees, Tony’s farm is twenty miles from a telephone, and about ten miles from the electrical grid. His fields are filled with tropical fruit trees, birds, and snakes. Pure spring water bubbles out of the ground near his mill, and he has built a house with beautiful views in a clearing at the high point of his farm. In every sense, it is the opposite of his bustling, workaday life in Queens. Families walk up the dirt roads with their picking baskets, on the way to work. Schools are closed during the harvest, and people come from nearby towns to participate. He describes his property as “paradise” and tells me how he wants to move here permanently with his family and lead a pastoral farmer’s life.

Tony would do so, if only people did not want to kill him so badly. In the past few years, his home has been burned down three times, his crop has been stolen out of his barn, and he has been attacked by a family of machete-wielding thugs in the central plaza of a nearby town. While I was in Honduras, his field boss was attacked by two men while driving through the farm. They shot at him with pistols, leaving bullet holes in the driver side door of his pickup. Fortunately, Tony’s right-hand man was unscathed, but the next time Tony goes to visit his farm, he will wear a bulletproof vest.
The causes of the violence against Tony are complex. From 1994 to 1999, coffee prices were consistently over $1 per pound, but they dropped below 60 cents from 2000 to 2003, which is less than the cost of production. Tony pays his pickers slightly above the going rate of about $2.50 per hundred pounds of coffee cherries, but he is singled out as an exploitative outsider while other coffee growers are not. This is due to the fact that he is an absentee landlord who does not speak Spanish, and the belief that he makes millions selling his coffee in New York. It is important to note that there are few strong social bonds between landowners and peasants in La Quebrada, as is often the case in the “moral economy” model of peasant life (Foster 1965; Scott 1976). Although, in a general sense, landless people depended on landholders economically, the particular families that were “up” or “down” at a given moment were constantly changing (Reichman 2006). Therefore, people hated Tony not because he was an outsider, but because they believed he was making enormous profits in New York that were far greater than the amounts earned by “normal” farmers.

One night I naively asked a man who lived on the outskirts of Tony’s farm what he thought of him. He launched into a racist tirade about how Tony could not speak Spanish, barely ever visits his farm, and lives a life of luxury in New York while his neighbors suffer. Adding to the problem, Tony’s field boss is not from the adjoining hamlet. He is the owner of a medium-sized coffee farm who lives in town and who formerly worked as a migrant in New Jersey, where he learned to speak English, enabling him to communicate with Tony. Therefore, Tony’s only full time employee is, by local standards, a member of the upper class—a returned migrant and coffee farmer, who also happens to make a steady income managing Tony’s farm and running an electrical supply store in town.

Due to the class inversions that occur on Tony’s farm, workers have to confront their place in a productive system in a far different way then they would if Tony were a typical local farmer who sold his coffee to a coyote (intermediary) or local miller–processor. The fact that people are “out of place” according to local social structure, coupled with Tony’s foreign-ness, force people to reflect upon the nature of the system. Tony, who is supposedly a wealthy New York businessman, becomes the symbol of exploitation in the coffee trade, a metaphor for the relationship between poor Honduran workers and the wealthy people at the centers of the capitalist world.

Tony balks at the idea that he is exploiting workers, since he is losing money himself. How can he pay them any more when he is not making a profit? He arrived in the United States as an unskilled immigrant worker, and he sympathizes with his employees, but feels the violence against him is motivated by a misunderstanding of the system, for which he is unjustly singled out. He says to me, “Picking coffee all day, carrying sacks on your back up and down hills, that’s no life, man . . . . And then they got nothing to do for the rest of the year, it’s no wonder they hate us.” I sense some tinges of guilt and ask him if he feels any. “I feel nothing. I’m just trying to run a business and support my family. I don’t want to live like a dog. I’ve done it before. It’s the system we live in.”

Tony dreams of expanding his business to the JFK passenger terminal, but concessions for spots in the terminal are only open to national brands. He currently is only roasting
about 10,000 of the 100,000 pounds he produces each year, and the rest is sold to a Honduran exporter for the market price of about 35 cents a pound (2002 price). This puts him in a bizarre position. He imagines that the coffee he grows—but cannot roast himself—is sold on the commodities market and then roasted, brewed, and sold by a national chain, while he languishes in Building 45, frustrated by his inability to expand the business.

Tony’s case is especially interesting because he has participated in the global division of labor from almost every conceivable angle. He was both a worker and manager at a major international company, but he was ultimately fired for reasons beyond his control. He became an entrepreneur, hoping for more control over his life, but ultimately, his success in the coffee business is limited by the power of international corporations to dictate the terms of the coffee trade. He is seen as an exploitative capitalist by his employees in Honduras, and has been robbed and physically attacked, but he is a struggling small-businessman in the United States. He lives in a crowded home in Queens, hoping to send his daughters to college one day, but barely scraping by.

One would expect Tony to have an interesting perspective on global capitalism and fairness. He is an example of what Michael Kearney (1996) has called “polybians,” in an attempt to theorize class in the global economy. Polybians—a play on the word “plebian”—are people who occupy a polymorphous place in the global class structure, and cannot rightly be called peasants, workers, or capitalists according to their relationship to the means of production. Tony, a señor (somebody, landlord) in Honduras and a peon (peasant, peon) in the States, certainly fits the bill. Despite this unique perspective, Tony locates injustice at the most immediate level. He accepts the basic facts of capitalist life, and this is most apparent in his resigned acceptance of the violence directed against him. He understands what is like to be an exploited worker, and he understands the hopelessness the pickers on his farm face. Yet he feels powerless to change anything.

He directs his anger toward national chains. He is especially frustrated by advertisers and marketers who, as he sees it, hype inferior coffee made by major brands. He is also frustrated by the political clout of the major companies, which keeps him from relocating to the JFK passenger terminal. The symbolic and the political aspects of the coffee value chain are the elements that he does not understand or control. He is frustrated by the fact that he grows, transports, roasts, and sells his own coffee yet still loses out to the Starbucks of the world, who claim to have close relationships with coffee farmers, yet rely on “hype” to sell their coffee. If people really cared about coffee farmers, he reasons, they would avoid the flashy brands altogether, because farmers play a relatively small role in their business, compared to small-scale operations like his.

In this case, people at various points in the division of labor locate injustice at the proximate level. Tony’s pickers blame him for their low wages, and he blames the national brands for limiting the growth of his business. No one has a systemic picture of the totality of the coffee market, even Tony, who perhaps more than anyone else has participated within it from multiple positions and can therefore transcend the
segmentation of knowledge that occurs in any complex division of labor, let alone the contemporary global economy.

**Fair Trade’s Ethical Philosophy**

In the cases of Tony and his angry employees—neighbors, a social relationship that was previously hidden was brought into consciousness, forcing the subjects to reconsider their place in a total social system. Tony’s workers resorted to violence when they thought of the coffee they harvested being shipped off to New York to be sold for millions of dollars. Tony lashed out against the national brands that seemed to limit his success in the coffee business by dominating the passenger terminal at JFK. In each case, coffee becomes a medium through which people imagine and reflect upon their place in a system of production and exchange.

In their own way, Tony and his workers are thinking in ways that are analogous to those of fair trade coffee buyers. Both groups reflect upon their own relationship to distant others to whom they are connected through trade (Silk 2004). Fair trade’s rhetoric rests upon affective bonds between producers and consumers in the global division of labor, mediated by cash and coffee beans. Through the purchase of coffee, consumers seek to establish a social relationship between producers and consumers.

To create a conscious impression of this relationship, fair trade emphasizes the simplification of the commodity chain—removing the intermediaries that separate coffee growers and drinkers (Barham 2002). As its marketing material says, “fair trade enables cooperatives to bypass middlemen and sell directly to U.S. importers at fair prices.”17 The middlemen that are removed from the fair trade process are local coyotes, small-time coffee buyers who process or transport coffee prior to export. In fair-trade’s rhetoric of directness, the mediating role of importers, fair trade auditors, or the roaster/retailers is downplayed to create a dyadic relationship between farmer and coffee drinker. By simplifying the commodity chain ideologically, coffee drinkers can comprehend their place in a total productive system.

Robert Foster (2005:285) has suggested that “renewed interest in the sociospatial life of stuff… has emerged as a therapeutic defense against the alienating specters of globalization.” He argues that scholars and citizens come to terms with their place in a productive system by tracking objects across time and space; he thereby draws a connection between the academic study of commodity chains and popular movements like fair trade. Implicitly, the study of global commodity chains is set against the notion of totalities. Because the totality (the global economy) cannot be understood in abstract terms, it can be approached empirically by tracking the movement of particular commodities through various points in the system.18 The new interest in “where stuff comes from” is a response to the alienating aspects of participation in the global division of labor.

This leads one to ask why the “stories” of certain commodities, like coffee, resonate so well with popular experience, given the fact that globalization has transformed virtually all aspects of international trade. Why is coffee the symbol through which
consumers reflect on their position in the global system, and why has the plight of the world’s coffee farmers become a key symbol of the injustices of global capitalism? Coffee has always been a volatile industry, with exploitation at various links of the supply chain, from agriculture, to distribution, to retail, yet only recently has it become a key symbol in public culture. Coffee’s place in the popular mindset is certainly disproportionate to its actual significance in the global capitalist system (compared to, say, petroleum).

Since the 1980s, coffee has shifted from a staple commodity to a highly symbolic expression of social identity (Roseberry 1996). Increased prosperity and consumer choice have created new possibilities for people to fashion themselves according to their own values, but tying one’s identity to the fruits of the capitalist market can lead to profound contradictions. In a world where individuality is valued, how does one simultaneously depend on mass-produced goods and assert individual creative autonomy? Relying on commodities to express oneself can provoke ambivalence if the objects of desire are contradictory to the values people use to define themselves. Due to coffee’s new symbolic power, it is an especially appropriate commodity through which people imagine their social position.

The ambivalence over commodity dependence is especially common among the professional classes, who tend not to be directly involved in the material production of commodities. Coffee has become such a powerful symbol of the contemporary upper-middle class, schooled in the countercultural values of the sixties, that American journalist David Brooks famously referred to highly educated suburban communities in the so-called “blue states” as “latté towns” (Brooks 2000:104). Brooks struck a nerve by coining the term “Bobo” or “bourgeois bohemian” (2000 page ref. 3). The “bobo” ideology is rooted in a value of the “particular,” “the unique,” and “the authentic,” but, contradictorily, boboism is based on the consumption of mass commodities.

The result of these processes has been an ever-expanding search for “authentic” commodities in a homogenized world (Kopytoff 1986). Food and clothing are important elements of the creation of one’s social identity, so consumer brands like McDonalds, The Gap, Nike, and Starbucks are the most targeted symbols of homogenization. Educated, cosmopolitan people are especially ambivalent about their coffee—it is an addictive necessity for the professional lifestyle. Addiction is bad enough, but addiction to a product that compromises one’s sense of justice is even worse—a physical and moral vice. This is especially true now that tobacco use has become uncommon in offices, and strong coffee and caffeinated soft drinks have become the stimulants of choice for the professional class.19

Compared to other tropical food products, the “story” of coffee is easy to tell. Sugar provides a useful comparison, since it is also a mild stimulant mainly grown in the tropics. Sugar is a relatively undifferentiated product. There are only a few brands of sugar on the supermarket shelves, and no brand carries any symbolic message about status or lifestyle. Unlike coffee, sugar is used as an ingredient in hundreds of processed foods like soft drinks and candy. Coffee is consumed in relatively
unadulterated form, and is not used in many processed foods. It would be almost impossible to try to know the origin of the sugar we consume, since it is found in so many products and in so many forms (fructose, glucose, dextrose, sucrose, etc.), and is produced all over the world, including the United States. Coffee is easy to follow from plantation to cup because it is purchased as a whole or ground bean with relatively little modification.

For fifty years, the image of the coffee farmer in the United States has been Juan Valdez, the trademark of Colombia’s National Federation of Coffee Growers (FNC). As an idealized version of the rural producer, this image is a nostalgic nod to the Jeffersonian rural tradition, a man and his mule. In an age where industrialization and the global expansion of corporate food production make the small farmer into a valued nostalgic category, this image of the small coffee farmer is appealing. Some of the most famous U.S. ad campaigns, such as Uncle Ben’s rice, the Cream of Wheat man, Aunt Jemima, and the Corn Flakes girl, have all used nostalgic depictions of rural life to sell industrial food products (Lears 1994). The relatively unadulterated form in which we consume coffee, coupled with an idealized version of the small farmers who grow it, make it easy to put a “face” behind coffee, especially when compared to commodities like sugar (or tea and bananas) that are associated with plantation agriculture rather than yeoman farmers.

In this context, fair trade coffee becomes the ultimate unmediated commodity, even though the ideological vision of a direct consumer–producer link is entirely dependent upon marketing and branding. Small-scale production can only obtain its nostalgic value under advanced capitalism, in which mass-produced goods are the norm. Although this valorization of “simplicity” is founded on principles of social justice and progressive politics, it has an inherently conservative component, in that it requires coffee farmers to fit within a nostalgic cultural category derived from contemporary ideological trends in the developed West.

As a form of political subjectivity, fair trade is based on the elimination or negation of mediating institutions—be they coyotes, states, marketing boards, or international corporations. It is especially easy for consumers to erase the state from view with regard to coffee, because the centers of demand for fair trade are western Europe and the United States, places where coffee is not produced (with the exceptions of Hawaii and Puerto Rico). Therefore, consumers can avoid tough political questions about the role of national politics in market regulation (the debate over protectionism, for example) that would not be possible if applied to domestic industries like sugar, corn, or wheat.

I would suggest that the alienation experienced by Tony and his workers is, in many ways, parallel to that felt by fair trade coffee consumers. Through the medium of coffee, people begin to consciously re-imagine their roles as citizens in the global economy. In the absence of a systematic theory or frame through which they can comprehend this structure, people resort to individual behavior as the source of political transformation, locating injustice (and the potential for justice) at the most immediate level possible.
Globalization and the (Im)possibility of Regulation

Earlier in this essay, I mentioned that coffee was one of the world’s most heavily regulated commodities for almost thirty years (1962–89), and the failure of fair trade’s proponents to recognize the ICA’s significance shows the degree to which political institutions have been erased from contemporary ideas of economic justice. The ICA was a treaty that established a quota system, restricting the coffee supply when international prices dropped to levels that threatened farmers’ survival. It involved stakeholders from all sectors of the coffee trade in its organization, which allowed it to grasp the industry at a relatively high level. Its standards were legally enforceable; individuals or groups could face fines or punishment if they exchanged coffee that had not been handled under the rules of the ICA.

It is not a coincidence that the ICA system basically followed the chronology of the Cold War. The ICA was passed in 1962, after the Cuban Revolution led the United States to take the fate of rural Latin America seriously. The United States saw the agreement as a way of warding off social revolution by guaranteeing a fair price for coffee. Because coffee-producing countries were mostly in the centers of the post-colonial world—Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia—the United States had a strategic interest in promoting economic stability in rural parts of these countries. Fittingly, the ICA collapsed in 1989, after the demise of the Soviet Bloc and the Central American peace accords ended the threat of Soviet-style communism in those regions. Fair trade began to grow in popularity immediately after the ICA’s demise, and it maintains the exact same price floor that was maintained by the ICA. Surprisingly, fair trade’s proponents never mention its functional similarity to the ICA, or the fact that it developed after the international treaty fell apart.

Given the fact that contemporary globalization is based on the existence of a single social system, it is surprising that the possibility of international regulation has systematically disappeared from political discourse. Even fair trade, a movement that is ideologically concerned with social justice and the well-being of commodity producers in the developing world, negates the power of collective institutions to regulate or transform society in the interest of the public good.

Returning to Foster’s suggestion that movements like fair trade are responses to the alienating effects of globalization, I would ask what the concrete form of this response says about contemporary political subjectivity. When people begin to consider their place in the global economy, why does this lead to responses that are basically private or personal? After all, one can imagine many possible ways that individuals could be integrated into wider social groups to combat these alienating forces. This was exactly the problem that Durkheim set out to solve in *The Division of Labor in Society* (1984[1893]): How can solidarity be created in a society with a highly fragmented division of labor?

For Durkheim, the answer was “occupational groups,” institutionalized bonds formed by people at all points in the division of labor. He believed that institutionalized communication between occupational groups would enable individuals to see their place in a collectivity, leading to utopian collective effervescence. Like fair trade,
occupational groups would create a social relationship between distant others, connected by the division of labor; unlike fair trade, this relationship would be based on institutionalized communication, rather than advertising, marketing, and private consumer practice.

I would suggest that the narrow forms of political subjectivity I have described are the products of systematic changes in the relationship between nation and state. For much of modern history, the nation-state functioned as the framing principle of social identity (Anderson 1982). Turner (2002:64) has argued that economic globalization has eroded popular identification with states, a process that he calls the “de-hyphenization” of the nation-state. As a result of this process, citizens identify with shared participation in the global market, rather than membership in a national community. Akhil Gupta (1998:314–320) describes a similar process, by which nation and state are “un-bundled” in India as a response to the demands of global markets. As a result of the erosion of the ideological bond between nation and state, alienated citizens see no collective institution that mediates between their personal needs and the global market. Thus, private action becomes the only outlet for their dissatisfaction. In the case described by Gupta, Indian peasant groups attack the fast food chain KFC as a response to their declining political power in a newly liberalized marketplace.

This basic contradiction—the recognition of participation in a single, global society, with no means of transformation beyond individual acts—is symptomatic of trends in contemporary theory, including the anthropology of globalization. Most anthropologists are critical of neoliberal globalization, but few have any hope in the state’s ability to regulate the economy. Post-1968 intellectuals have tended to see the state as an agent of oppression, following in the legacy of Foucault. The realities of globalization are usually seen as challenges to the power of nation-states, but few see global integration as presenting the possibility for greater transnational regulation of the economy.

It is surprising that globalization is tended to be seen as complex, indeterminate, and unstructured (e.g., Appadurai 1996), while the concept itself is based upon the existence of a single, integrated system. Writers like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, for example, have tried to develop a collective political platform to reform the global economy, but they explicitly deny the power of states or international institutions, arguing that new “multitudinous” de-centered social formations must develop in the place of modern nation-states for true reform to take place (Hardt and Negri 2004). They see the source of potential reform in “the common,” a transnational group linked through technology and shared participation in a global sociocultural whole. David Graeber (2001) has argued in favor of anarchism, the establishment of new social bonds outside of authoritarian state structures.

Returning to the story of Tony Chan and his workers, recall that Tony’s frustration came from two sources—his inability to access the JFK terminal, and the low price paid for his coffee on the open market. According to Talbot (1997a,b), five transnational corporations—Nestle Foods, Procter and Gamble, Kraft (Altria/Phillip Morris), Coca Cola, and Sara Lee—control over 60 percent of the world coffee market. Tony
sells the coffee he cannot roast himself to an exporter that is a subsidiary of Volcafe, the world’s third-largest green coffee trader. Volcafe sells to the major coffee roasters mentioned above, and is a subsidiary of London-based ED&F Man Holdings, one of the world’s largest corporations and operator of a hedge fund worth tens of billions of dollars.

Faced with this consolidation of trade, the fact that transnational consumer groups have come to re-imagine their place in the global division of labor is an important development. Renewed interest in global commodities systems can make social relationships explicit across time and space. However, this recognition has produced forms of political subjectivity that are inadequate to the task at hand, regulating the global economy in the interest of social solidarity. Alienated citizens comprehend their role through the metaphor of coffee, and struggle to formulate principles of justice in a seemingly incomprehensible system. I would suggest that the integration of the economy into a single global market should be seen as an opportunity for the type of transnational regulation accomplished by the ICA. After all, the WTO has been remarkably effective in regulating capital transnationally, while social concerns are left to fragmented or private movements like fair trade. Fair trade demonstrates that there is popular will for this sort of program, but, in the absence of any guiding theory, it is channeled toward private behavior.

Notes

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1. I recognize that fair trade is not stateless, in the sense that its practices are still covered by the laws of the individual nations in which it exists. In theory, fair trade’s claims could be regulated by laws against consumer fraud or truth-in-advertising if disputes over its auditing practices arose. To my knowledge, this has not occurred anywhere in the world.

2. The particular standards vary by country, based on the average wage and size of land holdings in a given country. See: http://www.transfairusa.org/pdfs/Coffee%20SP%20versionJune04.pdf for more details.
3. Recently, there has been considerable scholarly work on fair trade. Early studies looked at the potential of fair trade as a corrective to mainstream global capitalism, written from the point of view of fair trade activists (Barham 2002; Renard 1993; Raynolds 2000, 2002; Raynolds et al. 2004). Recent empirical studies by Lyon (2007) and others have taken a local-level approach, studying the effects of participation in fair trade markets in particular cooperatives in Central America, and then contrasting the actual material benefits to coffee farmers with the rhetoric of the fair trade establishment.


5. The ICA technically still exists, but it no longer contains any regulatory provisions. Instead, the current ICA provides funding for the International Coffee Organization, which publishes price data and conducts studies to improve efficiency in coffee production. See Bates (1997) for a comprehensive account of the rise and fall of the ICA.

6. I use the term “forms of political subjectivity” rather than Foucault’s concept of “governmentality” to avoid the state-determinism implied by the latter. “Governmentality” is based on a view of political agency in which the state ultimately disciplines its subjects to consolidate control. Although I certainly see contemporary fair trade as an effect of neo-liberal regimes, I do not see its rise as the consequence of state-led discipline, given the fact that the importance of the state has weakened under neo-liberalism.

7. Miller (2001) asserts that the anthropology of global commodity chains can provide the empirical grounds upon which consumers can judge the impact of behavior on the wider society, leading to new forms of political engagement.

8. The specific names and places described here are pseudonyms.

9. La Quebrada is a pseudonym that I use to protect the identities of local people involved in illegal activity, especially human smuggling. It was the site of field research I conducted between 2001 and 2004.

10. The coffee crash coincided with a major boom in emigration to the United States, so these “easy money” myths were quite common. See Reichman (2006) for more information about the relationship between coffee and migration.

11. Eric Wolf’s early work on coffee communities in Puerto Rico (1956) showed that the international coffee market was too volatile for such stable bonds to exist, and this was certainly the case in La Quebrada.

12. Wolf referred to this process as “the circulation of elites.” The class structure itself remained constant, but the particular members of each class changed due to luck in the market.

13. Workers are also forced to confront the wealth of the United States due to the pervasive presence of returned migrants and families that live on migrant remittances. Although few migrants from La Quebrada actually live in the New York area, it is still considered to be the center of American capitalism.

14. The coffee harvest generally lasts from late-October to mid-February.

15. Note that this price is far lower than the spot price of 65 cents that I mentioned above. The spot price is the average price paid for imported coffee at the New York Board of Trade. The price paid to producers is far lower.
16. Kearney’s description of “polybians” was based on the experience of Oaxacan peasants, most of whom do not own significant land or capital, in contrast to Tony. In this sense, he is closer to the bourgeoisie than the subjects of Kearney’s study, but the core of Kearney’s argument about class still holds: categories like “peasant” and “capitalist” are hard to sustain in the contemporary global economy.


18. Appadurai’s (1996) landmark essay on “flows” made the anti-structural basis of this argument explicit.

19. As if to prove that coffee is now literally seen as a fuel for capitalist work, the American chain Dunkin’ Donuts has, as its slogan, “America Runs on Dunkin.”

20. This is analogous to the valorization of nature during the Industrial Revolution in England, described by Raymond Williams in his classic book, The Country and the City (1973).

21. The ICA’s demise was largely due to the fact that its most powerful member states placed their own national political interests over the interests of the industry as a whole, and it became dominated by internal conflicts and the hegemonic interests of the two largest coffee-producing nations, Brazil and Colombia (Bates 1997).

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