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# Solidarity Interrupted: Coffee, Cooperatives, and Certification Conflicts in Mexico and Nicaragua

Bradley R. Wilson and Tad Mutersbaugh

*Ethical commodity networks have been advanced as a means to promote cooperative development, engender more democratic forms of governance, promote environmental conservation, and redistribute a greater share of returns to farmers and workers. This essay draws upon long-term ethnographic research on the role of solidarity within two Mesoamerican coffee-producing cooperatives to understand the effects of certification regimes that undergird many ethical commodity networks today. The essay uses a labor-centric conception of solidarity to demonstrate that the pressures and demands created by certifications intended to generate more just outcomes can also strain existing solidarities that bind cooperatives together.*

**Key Words:** Cooperatives, Ethical Commodity Networks, Fair Trade, Mesoamerica, Solidarity

Over the past two decades, ethical commodity networks have been advanced as a means to promote cooperative development, engender more democratic forms of governance, promote environmental conservation, and redistribute a greater share of returns to farmers and workers. Solidarity is often deemed necessary to these networks and is considered the basis of their ethical claims and political possibilities. However, the role of farmer and worker solidarities in ethical commodity networks has received scarce attention in more than two decades of research on the subject.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, farmers and workers who supply ethical or quality certified goods are rarely described as agents of solidarity, and farmer and worker solidarities are rarely represented as fundamental to the work of constructing more ethical commodity networks. Instead, whether implicitly or explicitly, farmers and workers (and their cooperative associations) are often reduced to objects of benevolent concern rather than understood as key protagonists in solidaristic struggles for the making of ethical commodity networks. Yet such solidarities are

1. For examples of research on farmer and worker solidarity in ethical commodity networks, see Besky (2014), Bacon (2013), Sen (2017), Lyon (2010), Mutersbaugh (2002a), Naylor (2018), and Wilson (2013).

fundamental to ethical commodity networks, and they cannot be taken for granted or treated as static. In many cases, while these solidarities give rise to ethical commodity networks, they can also be compromised by them.

In this essay we highlight the role of solidarities within two coffee-producing cooperatives in Mesoamerica to demonstrate the disruptive effects of the expansion, cross-conditionality, and harmonization of certification regimes that undergird many ethical commodity networks today. Drawing on long-term fieldwork in Oaxaca, Mexico, with the Coordinadora Estatal de Productores de Café de Oaxaca, or CEPCO (Mutersbaugh 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2005a, 2005b), and in Matagalpa, Nicaragua, with La Central de Cooperativas Cafetaleras del Norte, or CECOCAFEN (Wilson 2010, 2013), as well as theoretical work on ethical commodity networks (Wilson and Mutersbaugh 2015), we zero in on the role of solidarity in regional cooperatives that supply fair-trade, organic, and quality certified goods. CEPCO and CECOCAFEN were among the earliest suppliers of fair-trade, organic, and direct-trade-certified coffee in Mesoamerica, and therefore they offer a critical vantage point from which to view the disruptive effects on producer-union dynamics of the integration of certification. Although ethical commodity networks are envisaged by advocates as enhancing economic solidarities through the promise of greater transparency, to the benefit of all, certification regimes have become a subject of scrutiny and outright conflict in regional cooperatives as the social and economic lives of producers become more and more implicated in the production of certified goods (Mutersbaugh 2005b; Wilson 2013).

We have three aims. First, while drawing attention to power relations in producing diverse economies and forging postcapitalist futures (Gabriel and Sarmiento 2020; Harris 2009; Miller 2015; Sarmiento 2017), we challenge an idealist view of solidarity that rests on the presumed attitudes of individuals and predetermined scripts of class interest, humanist sentiment, or political objectives (Fantasia 1989; Featherstone 2012; Gibson-Graham 2006; Williams 2016). Instead, we argue in favor of an understanding that solidarity is, as Fantasia (1988, 10) argues, “Created and expressed through mutual association.” We then observe that solidarity relations built upon “mutual association” have been crucial, for example, to both the formation and reproduction of local-level organizations that have supplied certified coffee to global markets.

Our second aim, building upon scholarship on ethical commodity networks, is to examine the effects of product certification as a set of practices; we argue that, insofar as these certification practices disrupt existing communitarian practices, they may undercut solidarity. Extending our concern about a growing “certified-industrial complex” (Wilson and Mutersbaugh 2015), we explore how farmers and workers cooperatively negotiate this phenomenon and turn certification to their advantage. In the current ISO-based transnational certification schema, the growing complexity, cross-conditionality, and harmonization of standards associated with the certified-industrial complex contributes to conflicting effects. In some instances the technical organization of certification has had positive

effects: spurring new forms of communication, enabling rent seeking for farmer organizations, creating community-based and regional employment as certification professionals, opening opportunities for cross-community solidarities, and providing opportunities for gender equity (Lyon, Bezaury, and Mutersbaugh 2010; Mutersbaugh 2005a, 2005b).

Third, while we recognize that ethics, power, and cooperation in producer organizations are socially negotiated (Mutersbaugh 2002b; Wilson 2013), we argue that the emergent tensions associated with meeting stringent certification standards, often for multiple product certifications (e.g., quality *and* fair trade *and* organic *and* sustainable), have led regional cooperatives to experience periods of membership attrition and leadership crisis and even to buckle under the strain of complying with the demands of, for example, coffee certification. In these negative instances, the demands of certification have an inverse effect: creating organizational opacity, instituting distrust (for instance, during inspections), fostering dynamics of internal competition, and furthering rural differentiation. Taken together, performative aspects of certification practice can, as we detail below, undermine existing community relations of trust and mutual obligation. Given the widespread purchase of certified “alternative” economic relations—within which we would also include environmental projects such as community-based carbon sequestration (see Otto 2019)—we find it absolutely vital to gaze at power. Reckoning with certification practices and how their power is socially negotiated within working communities—not just celebrated by NGOs, consumers, and enterprises—is crucial to understanding the dark-side forces that workers and farmers navigate and struggle against in community-based cooperative developments and solidarity economies that advance postcapitalist politics (Gibson-Graham 2006; Miller 2015; Sarmiento 2017).

### **Ethical Commodity Networks: Consumer versus Worker-Centric Conceptions of Solidarity**

Over the past three decades an “ethical turn” has transformed conventional agro-food networks, bringing greater attention to green and ethical consumption campaigns and niche-market branding of agro-food commodities that meet ever more precise production requirements and standards. This ethical turn has led to a re-configuration of production and consumption around a logic of transparency in which producers are expected to perform tasks that are “made visible” to downstream actors such as retailers and consumers via certification. Such performances engender what many have described as more ethical commodity networks. Ethical commodity networks depend upon standards and certification regimes that establish a process of third-party documentation and verification through which the desired green or ethical qualities of food production can be observed from authoritative and accurate information. Standards, certification, and auditing protocols

are designed to produce trustworthy and valuable “real” information on commodity qualities that subsequently enable ethical action, often by downstream actors such as firms and consumers. Following this logic, it is often argued that provisioning of greater and more accurate information about food (including conditions of production, processing, and trade) enables market actors, from producers to consumers, to make more informed decisions about desired commodity qualities in order to ensure profitability, accountability, and social responsibility. Certification, we are promised, delivers win-win benefits for buyers and sellers of goods by revealing critical information necessary for ethical action.

In broader theoretical terms, the politics of ethical commodity networks has generated a wide array of theoretical interventions and debates. At the core of these debates is a normative argument about the political possibilities engendered through shifts in production, communication, technology, and market relations brought about by ethical commodity networks. A great deal of this literature takes a consumer-centric conception of solidarity as its starting point, suggesting that by enrolling retailers and consumers in efforts to transform production we may foster alternative trade models and spaces.

Ethical commodity networks and certification regimes originated in the 1980s and 1990s as a transnational response to social and environmental injustices. NGO-led campaigns communicated critical information about shady business practices and introduced new forms of advocacy and shopping in spaces of food consumption (Wilson and Curnow, 2013). Certifications like organic and fair trade provided credible ways for consumers to connect their moral concerns with tangible action to promote solidarity economies. Knowledge of various standards and certifications associated with everyday food choices facilitated what Mike Goodman (2010) has called a kind of “development consumption” in which consumers and firms distant from each other were mobilized individually and collectively to transform relations of production. At their core, ethical consumption campaigns sought to promote new geographies of responsibility, trust, and mutual aid between consumers and producers by making production and trading practices visible and by conveying that information from spaces of production to spaces of consumption via audits, reports, and labels (Naylor 2017).

Consumer-centric narratives about the success of ethical commodity networks are fundamental to an imaginary of development consumption that remains hard-wired into the collective psyche of contemporary ethical consumption campaigns promoting certified foods as beacons of more responsible futures (Goodman 2010; Naylor 2014). Demands for greater transparency through certification have in many cases inspired consumer solidarity with various causes and have been critical for mobilizing consumers to participate in NGO campaigns and buy ethical goods (Wilson and Curnow 2013; Lyon, Ailshire, and Sehon 2014; Naylor 2018). Numerous studies illustrate that demands for greater transparency through certification in many cases have inspired humanitarian sentiments and consumer benevolence toward farmers, workers, and distant others (Bacon 2013; Keahey 2015; Wilson

and Curnow 2013); engendered ethical practices; and mobilized consumers to realize profit for the investments made by these networks.

Plenty of evidence suggests that supplying certified foods promoted through ethical-consumption campaigns has created rent-seeking opportunities for farmers and cooperatives who otherwise have struggled to compete in undifferentiated markets defined purely by economies of scale. For example, as producer organizations have expanded their administrative capacity to combine certifications such as fair trade and organic small-scale coffee, they have not only been able to capture more value from their land and labor but have also obtained significant concessions from national governmental export-support and farm-assistance programs and from international climate programs (Mutersbaugh 2012). Furthermore, the discovery of distinctive coffee attributes that fetch prices well above fair trade and organic premiums have ensured long-term contracts and special relationships with coffee importers and roasters abroad. Indeed, these narratives and the related evidence continue to enlist consumers to participate in acts of everyday solidarity with farmers and workers engaged in livelihood struggles at commodity-production sites around the world (Naylor 2014).

Through the lens of diverse-economies scholarship, ethical commodity networks represent both an example of the possibility of alternative economies and a set of relationships to read and analyze for economic difference. Yet, as we have learned through our fieldwork and accompanying politics, reading power relations within so-called ethical commodity networks scripted by product certifications is also necessary to forge anticapitalist or postcapitalist futures (Miller 2015). Indeed, viewed “from below,” certification is not an idea, a technology, or an outcome with a linear and teleological thrust toward improving the lives of farmers and workers. From a worker-centric conception of solidarity, meeting the standards and expectations codified within ethical commodity networks has demanded speculative and risky investments in changing land use, labor practices, and infrastructure as well as to costly registry payments necessary for accessing these markets and earning premiums. In the case of coffee, certification has required tremendous labor and risk. Performing certification standards and protocols has dramatically increased supervisory work and bureaucratic infrastructure and has elicited forms of economic exclusion and reconfigured local accountability structures in coffee production. Therefore, certification has introduced new burdens even when it has promised new benefits.

We argue that ensuring the delivery by farmers of certified fair-trade, organic, and gourmet coffee has depended upon much more than the presumed social benefits, price signals, and economic incentives believed to follow from “hooking up” such farmers and regional cooperatives into ethical commodity networks supported by benevolent consumers and firms (Wilson 2013). Taking a worker-centric conception of solidarity, we argue that farmers and cooperative organizations in Nicaragua and Mexico were not beneficiaries of ethical-consumption campaigns that touted fair trade, organic, and other certification schemes; rather, they

created the foundation for these schemes' development in the first place. Existing organizations built upon a long history of and experience with cooperative management to provide the organizational tools and templates for small-scale, collective certification practices. The active creation of certifications regimes, particularly for fair trade, organic, and gourmet coffee, relied upon monitoring templates and supply-chain protocols that built upon the administrative cohesiveness of producer-led village- and regional-level cooperatives that emerged from solidarity struggles before and after the mid-90s neoliberalization of coffee parastatals in both Nicaragua and Mexico (Bacon 2010a; Fridell 2007; Jaffee 2014; Wilson 2013). Many organizations prominent in global fair-trade/organic/gourmet coffee networks—such as UCIRI, CEPCO, and Michiza in Mexico and PRODECOOP and CECOCAFEN in Nicaragua—were initiated by tens of thousands of peasant producers who experimented with, innovated, and adopted ethical and quality certifications for agricultural production.<sup>2</sup> They were neither passive recipients of distant care nor beneficiaries of an economy of repair. CECOCAFEN and CEPCO, like many coffee cooperatives in Mexico and Central America, served as the proverbial machine shop for the development of various certifications now governing production and guiding buyer decisions worldwide. They didn't receive benefits from certification schemes. They produced these schemes.

### Reworking Solidarity

As we describe further below, from a worker-centric conception of solidarity within coffee-producing cooperatives, a praxis of association among farmers was vital to the establishment of certification protocols and a supply of coffee from farmers through ethical commodity networks. Historically, this associative work—this solidarity—in coffee-producing communities, although unacknowledged, both enabled the rise of ethical coffee networks and was also disrupted by the demands of certifications to sustain entry into coffee markets. Taking the literature on workplace ethnography as our starting point (Burawoy 1989; Chari 2004; Carney and Watts 1990; Fantasia 1989; Ong 2010; Scott 1976, 1992; Wright 2006), we see solidarity as a set of values and practices that get worked out through an active social process in working communities, what Fantasia (1989, 10) calls praxis, or “purposive activity that changes the world and is changed by it at the same moment.” Workplaces and communities organized around working lives (mines, agriculture, manufacturing) frequently draw the attention of scholars concerned with theorizing solidarity, as these are critical spaces for the articulation of class consciousness

2. These organizations in Latin America are known by their acronyms UCIRI (Unión de Comunidades Indígenas de la Región del Istmo), CEPCO (Coordinadora Estatal de Productores de Café de Oaxaca), PRODECOOP (Promotora de Desarrollo Cooperativo de Las Segovias), and CECOCAFEN (La Central de Cooperativas Cafetaleras del Norte).

as well as key nodes within commodity chains that link particular sites of production to global capitalist circuits. Workplaces and communal activities linked to social reproduction and commodity production create conditions for purposive activity among workers and often mediate practical ethical claims to sustain or improve livelihoods. People work together in the fields, factories, or mines and thereby establish routines, languages, shared understandings of justice, and commitments to one another. In these sites and the wider landscapes of care that sustain them—by which we mean to signal the importance of the community-based governance within which these practices operate—working people (including unpaid, emotional, and affective laborers) establish associations and shared visions that often reflect a particular place-based struggle over livelihoods, albeit a struggle that is contingent and evolving.

While the form and function of solidarities may differ, what we find as common among critical conceptions of solidarity is an attention to the praxis of association. As Fantasia (1988) argues, our understanding of solidarity must move beyond the study of “given” motivations and episodic actions and focus instead on the formative social practice of mutual association over time and in place. Focusing on a performative praxis of association challenges the romantic assumption of primordial solidarities. Solidarity gets worked out over time and in place. Solidarities are contingent and can change. Yet it is also important to recognize that particular social conditions (crisis, injustice, oppression) and forms of association produce the potentialities for solidarity. Building upon Gilmore’s (1999) insights drawn from research with mothers of incarcerated children in California, Featherstone (2012, 23) writes that Gilmore draws attention to the “creative practices” and “productive character” of solidarity. Featherstone continues to argue that this “positions solidarity as actively generating and shaping shared values and identifications.” Featherstone writes that “there is a dynamic sense” in Gilmore’s account “of solidarity as a creative process which speaks to the bringing together of relations and trajectories.”

This conceptualization of solidarity is similarly articulated by Raymond Williams in his essays compiled in *Resources of Hope*. According to Williams, solidarity is not prefigured by class position but is a kind of group ethics and social bonding that gets worked out over time and in space through association. In the essay “The Social Significance of 1926,” which explores the conjuncture of forces that led to the general strike in Great Britain, Williams (2016, 106) writes of solidarity in the following way.

[Solidarity] begins ... in very local, even physical ways. It is the ethic of a group which has already been decisively established, often it is true by the initial action of others—the capitalist employers who have offered work and who have drawn men ... to take it—but then in shared immediate working experience, in the developing experience of a local community, in growing ties of family and kinship, a group which has the potential of solidarity already

present within it. This is not to underestimate the long struggle that then must then occur: the organizing, the raising of consciousness, the hard experience of recovering from disappointments or betrayals, the equally hard learning of collective disciplines.

Here, Williams critiques the assumption that solidarity is sufficiently maintained through the inherent affinities of people in a given locality, through an abstract conception of class consciousness between people, in their common work in an industry, or from their common experience of oppression. Although a sense of shared affinity, locality, ethnicity, or oppression can provide a basis for solidarity to emerge, according to Williams, there is no substitute for “hard learning” wherein individual responsibilities and collective obligations are tested and brought into the social fabric of an association like a union, cooperative, or social-movement organization.

While the history and praxis of association has been well documented in working-class struggles, it obviously extends well beyond them to include the praxis of association in antiracist, feminist, anti-imperial, queer, indigenous, and environmentalist struggles—as well as in kinds of regressive, racist, and populist agendas of conservative and fascist groups. By no means do we wish to suggest that solidarities established through the praxis of association necessarily always lead to progressive or radical outcomes. As feminist and antiracist scholars emphasize, solidarity practices and networks are informed by power relations, by inclusions and exclusions based upon race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, and disability (Featherstone 2012; Gilmore 1999; Mohanty 2003). We wish to acknowledge here that solidarity gets worked out in vital ways to create coherence and togetherness in working communities and engenders a sense of obligation and responsibility that goes beyond presumed rational action and the immediate economic benefits assumed to derive therefrom.

As numerous scholars who study workplace politics assert, the spatial and social conditions of commodity production present a unique potential for solidarities to emerge and evolve. In *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat Us*, June Nash (1993, 119) illustrated how worker solidarities in tin-mining communities in Bolivia were established through unions representing workers in the mines but also extended outward through communal, recreational, and housewives associations that helped these solidarities to fashion “a way of life that enables them to defend themselves in the wider society and provide meaning and interest to both young and old members of the community.” In the *Politics of Production*, Burawoy (1985) illustrated how solidarity among factory workers was built upon a praxis of communications between coworkers regarding the quality and pace of work on shop floors. As we have witnessed, working associations like regional cooperatives in the coffee sector are often underwritten by a kind solidarity practice among workers, households, and their broader communities, a solidarity that imparts practical content and social meaning to everyday life. In other words, in addition to consciousness

raising and political organizing necessary to resist capitalist ruling relations or cultural imperialism, far wider forms of associativity exist that, as Nash (1993, 119) writes, provide people with “the strength to resist cooptation and personal dehumanization from those who exploit their labor and try to rule their lives.”

### Solidarity, Cooperation, and Cooperativism in Mexico and Nicaragua

Solidarity is central to the place-based histories and praxis of association in Oaxaca and Matagalpa. Based on our ethnographic work, from the viewpoint of rank-and-file members of CEPCO and CECOCAFEN, these associations defended the rights of their members vis-à-vis the state to secure land claims, demanded subsidies from the state, and coordinated regional development and infrastructure projects. They served as key arenas for gendered conflicts and women’s struggles over land, labor, and livelihoods. The unions helped develop networks of allied local organizations and international NGOs to identify shared political and economic programs that benefited their members. They hosted convergence spaces in which political, economic, and social goals comingled in support of peasant livelihoods, autonomy, gender justice, and ecological conservation. They represented the interests of their membership in international conferences and regional meetings. While they were supported at times with funds from international NGOs, commitments from regional cooperatives to defend land, labor, and livelihoods—especially as they negotiated the reformism led by the neoliberal state—forced an explicit political orientation that recognized the historical vulnerability of peasants and the need for solidarity in the face of marginalization.

In Oaxaca many rank-and-file farmers and cooperatives affiliated with CEPCO also traced their sense of group ethics to place-based and historical land use and to communal labor rules called *cargos* and *tequios*. *Cargos* and *tequios* create communal labor rules and maintain common resources that support household production for both market and subsistence purposes, including schools, roads, water systems, and communal pastures. Village-council-appointed *cargo* holders organize tasks such as construction, maintenance, and public schooling, and they assign *tequio* work tasks to villagers. Between 78 and 91 percent of Oaxaca is held as communal and *ejidal* land. For common lands, the village general assembly appoints a “communal goods commissioner” who adjudicates land disputes with respect to family- and gender-based usufruct rights and who assigns villagers to maintain and manage collective assets such as communal pastures, forests, and waterways (see Worthen 2012). These norms-making practices are linked to the *usos y costumbres* governance framework that became widespread in Oaxaca—and across indigenous Mesoamerica (Lyon, Bezaury, and Mutersbaugh 2010)—due to a shared history that prompted indigenous communities to adopt, to varying degrees, a “corporate” structure in order to limit incursions by colonial and subsequent Mexican

national governments into local affairs (Wolf 1956; Nader 2000). These forms of mutual association are undergoing significant contemporary change yet continue to serve as a key way in which producer communities both enact solidarity and preserve local autonomy (Worthen 2015).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, moderating conflict through communal adjudication is a main feature of solidarity among farmers and other community members. In sum, the village-level praxis of association that informs farmer relations with the producer union is built upon local land use and labor norms and is rooted in a political desire for autonomy.<sup>4</sup> These kinds of locally negotiated rights and responsibilities play a central role in the producer cooperatives that make up of the base of CEPCO and inform its historical trajectory and political culture.

In Matagalpa, the political orientation and sense of group ethics among farmers affiliated with CECOCAFEN developed through a long period of class struggle over land redistribution in the 1970s and 1980s. Before the Nicaraguan Revolution, the Matagalpan region was dominated by a latifundio system in which smallholdings made up less than 20 percent of the arable land. Unlike Oaxaca's CEPCO smallholders—who share a long history of control over their land base, stretching in most cases to precolonial times—the rank-and-file members of the local-level Nicaraguan cooperatives that make up CECOCAFEN were actually farmworkers who either fought in the Revolution, served in militias during the civil war, received land in the accords ending the civil war, or acquired land in the region through sales that could be traced to an extensive land reform that took place from 1981–96. This transformative farmworker-to-smallholder identity as well as the shared experience of war and military service played a key role in the establishment of the cooperative association. The shared place-based history associated with gaining and maintaining control over land by this group of direct and indirect land-reform beneficiaries initially cohered around a need for association to protect their land claims, coordinate production, develop shared capital, and market their products. Moreover, the experience of military service, violence, and suffering by the veterans of the civil war—many of whom came of age while serving in revolutionary forces—also played a decisive role in defining the association. Internal union politics was shaped by moral accounting of historical commitments to defend land claims, pool capital resources, share NGO patronage, and support political campaigns that reinforced support for their land claims. This shared debt to

3. Villagers engage in frequent, local-level litigation in order to establish and arbitrate the norms that govern social practice (Nader 1990), and they employ the *usos y costumbres* management structure that features the use of *cargos* (administrative positions) and *tequios* (a corvée labor tax) to organize village and household production (Mutersbaugh 2002). By codifying and policing local norms, this litigiousness keeps disputes local and minimizes incidents of intervention by extralocal authorities and in so doing protects each village's political autonomy.

4. As Rus (1994) points out, this village autonomy has been further secured since the Nicaraguan Revolution by means of clientalist relationships in which peasant communities exchange their *vota verde* (peasant vote) in return for access to state-managed resources and political autonomy.

a history of struggle led existing members to press new entrants into the producer union to recognize the social value of local-level cooperatives that obtained weaker production performances; it also reduced the need for strict contractual agreements and high supervisory costs for union managers who could expect a continuous flow of product (Wilson 2010, 2013). Even in lean years when CECOCAFEN was unable to deliver the kind of premiums promised by certification, their farmers' fidelity remained strong because of the belief that cooperative officials shared their struggle and that the union management ultimately operated in the farmers' best interests—they were in the struggle together (Wilson 2013).

These histories resulted in particular relations of trust and mutual obligation between farmers and union officials that extended beyond the purely economic rationales for cooperation and unionization. The praxis of association in the regional cooperatives therefore combined political, social, and economic elements and translated to routine conversations, meeting agendas, and collective goals tied to place-based histories. We do not wish to romanticize this process of organizational formation or hide behind its contingency in time and space. As numerous studies emphasize and as our work also confirms, regional cooperatives in Mesoamerica can be exclusionary and may unevenly represent the political interests of men over women, and landholders over landless peasants while they may also reproduce patron-client relations between union leadership and individual members (Bacon 2010b; Mutersbaugh 2002b; Lyon, Bezaury, and Mutersbaugh 2010; Wilson 2013). However, these unequal social relations are not fixed, either. The regional cooperatives can also represent sites of struggle through which rank-and-file members negotiate these power relations within their communities and offer an arena for asserting new political and livelihood claims.

### **The Rise of the Certified-Industrial Complex**

Certifications have proliferated in the coffee sector since the late 1990s as market actors downstream in the commodity network—particularly importers, roasters, and retailers—responded to ethical-consumption campaigns, competed for novel rents for differentiated specialty coffees, and sought to reduce the high costs associated with searching for and securing them. The proliferation of quality standards and certifications was fueled by the desires of downstream actors in the coffee chain: the desire to produce scarcity in the coffee sector following the deregulation of global production and the crises of overproduction in the early 1990s and 2000s; to set up permanent supply-chain mechanisms that reduced transaction costs in sourcing high-value coffees; and to clean up the image of the coffee trade and promote sustainable development in poverty-stricken and environmentally sensitive coffee-producing regions. Certifications for coffee are conventionally understood in three forms: (1) the certification of organoleptic qualities perceived through sensory evaluation (such as fragrance, aroma, taste, aftertaste, body); (2)

certification of the ethical qualities associated with locational, social, or environmental practices as perceived through information conveyed in certification and labeling regimes; and (3) the certification processes themselves (organic, fair trade, gourmet), which must also conform to ISO standards and certification in order to ensure that the methods of certification meet international norms for transparency. Regarding the latter, FLO-Cert (Fairtrade Certification Ltd.), for instance, was spun off from Fair Labeling Organizations International in 2002, and organic norms previously designed by independent NGOs are now set by governmental bodies and certified by third-party certifiers subject to regulatory oversight (Daviron and Ponte 2005; Mutersbaugh 2005a; Wilson et al. 2012).

Organoleptic or taste-based qualities are certified through assessment of the biophysical attributes of the coffee itself, based on observable defects in the preexport processed bean and through sensory evaluation of pleasurable gustatory attributes of a brewed cup. These organoleptic qualities, sought after by gourmet and conventional buyers alike, come into being through networked labor practices that take place through on-farm and off-farm work that produces the distinctive attributes perceptible in the material commodity itself. Quality taste attributes are created through processes of varietal selection, cultivation, orchard maintenance, selective harvesting, drying, and milling. For small-scale farmers and cooperatives in Mexico and Nicaragua, organoleptic quality certification was introduced as a value-chain development strategy in the midst of the global coffee-price crisis from 2001–4. As opposed to the tradition of coffee grading, the kind of search work and sensory evaluation described above was introduced in Oaxaca and Matagalpa through funding from the World Bank, InterAmerican Development Bank, USAID, European Union, Ford Foundation, Cup of Excellence, Oxfam, and individual enterprises such as Thanksgiving Coffee, Equal Exchange, and Twin Trading. Such value-chain development initiatives, varying in form and function, helped to facilitate what the World Bank referred to as the competitive transition to coffee quality. While many of these coffee-evaluation programs were originally designed with promises of increasing farmer knowledge of the value of their coffees, sensory evaluation most often takes place in the absence of farmers, with little communication between cooperatives and farmers regarding the results of sensory evaluations in Oaxaca and Matagalpa. The results of sensory evaluations tend only to be shared with coffee buyers as a means to facilitate sales and arrive at price determinations for export. These results are not openly shared with farmer-members unless a specific direct-trade contract is negotiated. Such taste-based certification processes are absolutely necessary in the contemporary coffee economy.

Unlike organoleptic qualities, however, ethical qualities are not visually observable or detectable attributes in coffee—one cannot see or taste them. Ethical qualities must be communicated through auditing protocols that shape production and processing (in the case of organic and other ecological standards) and international contracting (in the case of fair trade). The informational output from these auditing practices (inspection reports, documentation) distinguishes these otherwise visibly

uniform coffees from one another. For such ethical qualities to be made visible, labor-intensive auditing processes on the farm and in the packhouse, processing center, and warehouse had to be established to differentiate and isolate the production, processing, and marketing of certified coffee.

Furthermore, over two decades, the certifications of both taste-based and ethical qualities have also become subject to reorganization, driven by ISO certification norms specifying that organizations be prevented from “self-certifying.” This has restructured information flows, particularly for certified qualities, with consequences for standards design, inspection practices, and price formation. An example may be found in the case of a Mexico-based certification agency that was required, as an outcome of an ISO 65-based audit, to remove board members who were also leaders of local coffee-producing organizations. This change conformed to ISO guidelines, yet it also constrained the ability of smallholders to participate in standards design—in other words, to organize politically to seek changes to ISO templates—given that the lived realities of farm livelihoods effectively limit the smallholders from fielding international petitions to change standards.

As Mutersbaugh (2005a) has argued, independent certification regimes produce a second rail of information that runs parallel to the movement of the commodity from production to consumption, documenting how a commodity is produced, processed, and governed and thereby differentiating it from other potentially comparable commodities. The purpose of this documentation and differentiation work is to transform the perceived value of the commodity downstream in the commodity chain by generating and transmitting information about labor practices, environmental services, processing methods, and potential social or ecological impacts of the commodity in question. Yet, even though these ethical commodity initiatives appear to advance alternative development goals, quality certifications are themselves governed by a set of logics that can reify instead of subvert established conventions within global commodity chains. First, ethical commodity networks tend to harmonize independently created standards within limits set by ISO norms that serve as a script for the reduction in trade barriers promoted by the WTO. Second, the standards makers—often but not exclusively based in commodity-consumer countries in the Global North—then defer to independent “third-party” certification arrangements in order to verify norms compliance carried out in sites of production in the Global South. And third, producer- and buyer-driven enterprises who meet the standards and achieve entry into these certified spaces then compete against other network participants in order to gain or protect access to exclusive trade information, such as gourmet-quality sources, and capture a larger share of the rents.

In sum, even though certified coffees are represented in the marketplace as discrete objects (fair trade, organic, gourmet) that connect us more closely to farmers and cooperatives, they are actually produced by a vast assemblage of norms, protocols, and labor practices that intersect at key moments and key spaces of coffee

production to affect land use, labor practices, and organizational dynamics. They cannot be separated from one another. Rather than working to meet one set of standards at a time, farmers and administrators have had to integrate these protocols into the entire operating structure of their organizations. The immersive, subjective experiences of attending to and laboring over quality thus recalls, in theoretical terms, the introduction of a new “mode of production,” in the more constrained and “local” political-economic sense of the term (see Williams 1979). Certifications do not simply overlay and enhance existing production and marketing relations but rather impose new mental and manual labor burdens upon farmers, workers, and producer organizations. As we have argued elsewhere, we might think of certifications as intimately tied to the development of a certified-industrial complex (Wilson and Mutersbaugh 2015). Indeed, paradoxically, the deepening demands of certification schemes intended to promote ethical commodity networks have actually disrupted the very relations of solidarity that help supplement and sustain organizations that supply certified goods.<sup>5</sup>

### Cooperation Meets Certification

As we have learned from our long-term ethnographic work with both CEPCO and CECOCAFEN, these organizations represent more than coffee-production and marketing firms in the eyes of their members. Their institutional cultures and political orientations also mediate extraeconomic interests. Yet, starting in the early 2000s, both organizations became deeply invested in the production and marketing of certified coffee as a means of sustaining their organizations and delivering greater returns to their members. To establish the labor processes and scale of production necessary to supply emerging ethical coffee networks in the 1990s and early 2000s, the managers of CEPCO and CECOCAFEN built upon existing solidarities and organizational histories to develop extensive governance capabilities to manage quality and provide transparency vis-à-vis allied organizations and network activities (see Bassett 2010; Eden and Bear 2010).

Capitalizing on their quality investments and emerging capacities for flexible production of quality certified coffee, CEPCO and CECOCAFEN differentiated themselves from established exporting houses and agro-industrialists producing coffee on vertically integrated estates. They gained a competitive advantage by leveraging the loyalties of their producer-members to ensure deliveries and by investing premiums and subsidies (from the state and NGOs) in state-of-the-art processing, grading, and sensory-evaluation facilities, by hiring staff for certification activities, by engaging in international marketing, by developing in-house financial operations, by launching rural-development projects, and even by

5. To be clear, we do not intend to suggest that solidarity relations are primordial or romantic but rather that they are crucial to the reproduction of trust in local-level organizations.

investing in domestic coffee roasting and cafés. However, certified production and processing methods in on- and off-farm facilities also changed these organizations dramatically.

To scale up certified coffee production, cooperatives had to forge multitiered, geographically dispersed organizations that were capable of supervising and supplying sufficient volumes for international contracts. The pressure to increase volumes of certified coffees led to recruitment efforts that brought various producer groups into contact, each of which had unique forms of solidarity that had developed out of their specific place-based, cultural, and historical contexts. Sustaining the scale, solvency, and competitiveness of the regional cooperatives revolved around the recruitment of new members and maintaining organizational coherence between different classes of farmers and managers. To create production systems that complied with exogenous quality standards and to build trust with buyers, particularly the kind of large commercial firms that offered the potential for long-term and repeated contracts, regional cooperatives focused their attention on establishing competency in and laboring for certification. Officials ran farmer-extension programs for quality compliance in a combined, holistic fashion, and farmers reshaped their lives around quality norms, altering household, communal, and cooperative relations in a bid to accommodate requirements in production and processing methods.

To achieve buy-in from rank-and-file farmers, CEPCO and CECOCAFEN cultivated ethical obligations embedded in place-based histories and collective struggles that bound their farmer-suppliers to crop agreements, meeting schedules, democratic processes, and other norms. Furthermore, to compete for buyer interest in a highly competitive coffee marketplace, regional cooperatives leveraged solidarity relations to win agreement on making investments in certification from annual revenues and assets. These investments introduced costly labor burdens to train up and implement certification schemes while they also created risky production systems, uneven distribution of premiums, new supervisory hierarchies, and internal differences that could disrupt rather than enhance solidarities central to the functioning of their organizations. Moreover, the increased auditing burdens to produce certified coffee resulted in unsustainable cost squeezes and other organizational difficulties (Wilson 2010, 2013). Even to win small-market premiums, farmers and regional cooperatives had to adopt burdensome and expensive certifications and take on long-term investments in infrastructure, often with little to no short-term payoff.

Farmers who once helped invent certifications began to face greater scrutiny and to bear larger risks and were economically squeezed by the increased workloads necessary to meet these multiple intersecting standards. From the perspective of farmers, workers, and producer organizations, this deepening investment in meeting exogenously determined requirements might best be viewed as running on a “certification treadmill.” The management of the regional cooperatives had to confront the difficulty not just of convincing buyers that their organizations

could meet taste-based and ethical quality standards for certification but also of maintaining solidarity with their rank-and-file members to ensure sufficient volumes year to year. All the while, the introduction of new criteria confounded previously important relations of solidarity among farmers and between farmers and cooperative officials. The following examples of conflict illustrate how these burdens/changes pressured worker and farmer solidarities.

### Certification Conflicts

In late 2005, coffee farmers from Oaxaca, Mexico, returned from a national protest demanding support from Mexico's Agricultural Ministry to find the union hall of their producer organization CEPSCO occupied by a dissident faction. The dissident faction was led by an "officer" who was originally hired through a quality-enhancement program sponsored by Starbucks, Oxfam, USAID, and leaders of the organization's largest regional affiliate. The dissidents wanted to usher in a new quality-control regime in which producers who could meet multiple standards would reap the most profits, as opposed to profit sharing. During this rebellion against the producer union, the dissidents occupied the offices for a month. While the majority of the union held their ground, by the end of the attempted coup, nine organizations left CEPSCO to form a new producer organization. This conflict rocked CEPSCO, one of the earliest suppliers of fair-trade and organic coffees, because the quality officer had convinced roughly 40 percent of the original producers to break away by encouraging them to angle for their own share of the high-end fair-trade and organic coffee market and to leave behind those who could not meet the standards.

This conflict in Oaxaca was not an isolated incident. In the same month, CECOCAFEN was facing an internal rebellion of its own. Like CEPSCO, the unrest in CECOCAFEN also stemmed from the introduction of a new quality-control regime. The chief instigator of this conflict, however, was a founder of the largest municipal-scale cooperative union and an ex-guerilla leader. Rather than leveraging quality to encourage defection from the cooperative, his grievances highlighted the forms of inequality that the quality regimes created within the existing organization. He claimed that the new regime adopted by CECOCAFEN officials was exclusive and unfairly rewarded several individual farmers and local cooperatives with special contracts at nearly two times the conventional market price. He argued that the special contracts were unjust because of massive collective investments in a cooperative processing facility that was intended to benefit all who subsidized its development. As one vocal supporter from another founding cooperative stated, "Why should they be the only ones who profit? It is *all* of our coffee that keeps the organization running."

These rebellions illustrate how certifications strained solidarities by changing production, increasing necessary on-farm labor discipline, and altering

investments and risk as well as who received shifting product-premium allocations. Moreover, certifications affected cooperative governance structures, transforming the leadership of regional cooperatives and creating opacity in postproduction processes that complicated farmers' efforts to understand quality norms, certification procedures, and their provenance. Yet, over the next few years, both producer unions also resolved, in varying degrees, these solidarity conflicts, and many of the dissident groups that were once party to the "certification conflicts" were ultimately won back into the fold. Both producer organizations survived the divisions among their members and the loss of production so critical to their ability to participate in coffee networks, but doing so required tremendous effort and investment to strengthen organizational ties, a kind of solidarity work often unacknowledged in the structuring and success of ethical commodity networks. In some cases union officials worked to win back farmer loyalty through public-outreach efforts to tap into deeper solidarities among farmers and cooperatives. In other cases union officials sought to restructure their organizations to balance the distribution of premiums and enhance social programs. The regional cooperatives in Oaxaca and Matagalpa labored to repair the bonds broken by a quickly evolving set of demands on their organizations even as they sought to guarantee supplies of high-quality organic and ethical coffees. And it was no easy task. As described by one leader of an organization that had recently reenrolled dozens of members that had left CEPSCO in the 2005 split, "We tell [the returning members] that 'we don't perform miracles, only the saints can do that.'"

## Conclusion

As we have learned over the past decade, the "certification conflicts" in Oaxaca and Matagalpa were not just isolated incidents but a more widespread social response to the changing landscape of coffee production and marketing heralded by the rise of the certified-industrial complex. Yet these conflicts receive scarce attention in what has become a voluminous literature on ethical coffee networks and their impacts on farmer and worker communities. The paucity of attention to conflicts such as these reveals a social distance from the lived realities of those who labor within ethical commodity networks. Pressures and demands created by certifications intended to generate more just outcomes can also strain existing solidarities that bind cooperatives together. While the examples provided above resulted in the reconfiguration of solidarities among the members of CEPSCO and CECOCA-FEN, we cannot assume that all conflicts are resolved in similar ways wherein such ties are maintained.

Reading for power and not only difference in working communities that supply ethical commodity networks has enabled us to see farmers and cooperatives in Nicaragua and Mexico as more than mere beneficiaries of ethical commodity networks. While overwhelmingly imagined by advocates as enhancing economic

solidarities through the promise of greater transparency to the benefit of all, ethical commodity networks have been produced by and have transformed the social and economic lives of farmers who labor to produce certified goods in Mexico and Nicaragua. In many cases, the changes produced by certification regimes that they helped to create have enabled farmers to reap the benefits from novel rents generated by their ability to navigate certifications and deliver the goods. In other cases, however, the introduction of certifications resulted in outright conflict in regional cooperatives. The conflicts reveal the myriad ways in which farmers are key protagonists in solidaristic struggles—including in the forms of solidarity that gave rise to these networks and the ongoing labor needed to maintain them. While such struggles have been obscured in a system that proclaims itself more just, moving toward a worker-centric analysis reveals important reconfigurations of power and expressions of agency that can enable reform in certification regimes and ethical commodity networks, to the benefit of farmers and workers.

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