# Representations of/and Real-time

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**Draft** Paper for Exploding Method: A new scholar symposium
20 September 2007

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**Abstract**
A highly competitive market has emerged in the wake of the Fairtrade explosion. My project asking how ethics functions through the market uses a multi-sited ethnographic approach to explore ethics in the coffee trade in Guatemala in its many forms and faces. Drawing on the work of Michel Callon (1998) among others, the market is here understood as performative: shaped by the multiple interactions between economy, technology and social life as they create the possibility of action within this market space. Ethical certifications attempt to render ethics visible and commodifiable. Yet these representations seem unable to capture the everyday ethics that are already part of coffee as a product, as a commodity and as a way of life. It is for this reason that expert interviews are limited and where traditional ethnographic participant observation becomes paramount: the ethics are in the people, places and things that form the discussions and debates in real-time. The use of multi-sited ethnography is still contested terrain and the ability to approach socio-technical assemblages remains messy. Preliminary research conducted in June and July 2006 produced contacts and networks to provide access to the many sites of coffee in Guatemala. The return to the field in January 2007 resulted in very different kinds of access, unforeseen research subjects and fruitful spaces of discussion. Throughout this research there is a tension between the desire to interview 'expert knowers' and the need to engage with people in the everyday. It is further bounded by time constraints and a sense of partiality. The paper will look at how we envisage multi-sited ethnography as a tool to explore socio-technical arrangements and how to communicate the complexity of the research experience beyond the level of representation.

## I

Calling for increased transparency in global commodity chains, ethical initiatives aim to establish a set of standards to ensure better social, labour and environmental conditions in production sites for products ranging from footballs to cotton to coffee. Over 100 million people are involved in the coffee industry across the world and many stand to benefit from increased pressure on ethical considerations. With expanding interest in the material link between production and consumption sites and increasing world attention on trade as a way to change uneven economic relations, the question of how ethics function through the coffee market is critical. This paper discusses how ethnography can address critical knowledge gaps between representations and real-time ethics in exploring how ethics functions through the market.

While Fairtrade tends to take centre stage and may be attributed with putting ethics into the minds of the average consumer, it is certainly not the only ethical brand on the market. The coffee industry is flooded with certifications that mimic or modify the Fairtrade model. These systems are

commonly referred to as sustainability initiatives for coffee where sustainability indicates a level of economic viability for farmers, environmental conservation and social responsibility. There is a growing body of literature attending to sustainable coffee (Young & Uttig, 2005; Giovannucci and Ponte, 2005) in which initiatives are grouped into two overarching systems: certification programmes and public/private initiatives. Sustainable coffee certification systems include Fairtrade, Utz, organic and shade grown or bird friendly labels wherein third-party companies establish and maintain a set of social, economic, and/or environmental standards through the granting and monitoring of a label. Public/private initiatives involve companies creating a set of environmental, economic or social criteria developed in-house and applied as needed to each buying situation. International coffee traders, roasters and vendors establish an independent set of ethics which they employ as part of their business model (Daviron and Ponte, 2005; Giovannucci and Ponte, 2005). While much of the literature maintains a distinction between labels and other models, (see Young & Uttig, 2005 among others) research in Guatemala shows that sustainable coffee schemes are growing in size and scope and that the distinction between label-based and private approaches is becoming blurred.

The popularity of ethical consumerism coupled with a revolution that demands better quality coffee indicates the ability of marketing and people power. Meanwhile, research at coffee origin shows that 'ethics' are multiple and situated; decisions are not based solely on the accepted definition of what it means to act ethically in extant considerations of 'fair trade'. One finds farmers dedicated to feeding their families, businesses bound to their stakeholders and small roasters in search of new and interesting taste all understanding their roles through their own personal notion of ethics. All of these people come into contact with representational ethics defined through certification models with varying degrees of knowledge and interest. The disconnects between the endless desire to make ethics consumable and the realities of a coffee farmer who has never heard of fairtrade, 'speciality' or the coffee revolution are obvious in Guatemala. The ethnographic research undertaken here provides the opportunity to communicate the complexity of ethical considerations and can support, change and address those disconnects.

## II

The approach adopted in this research follows the recent turn in economic sociology away from political economy to imagine that the interaction between economy, technology, and social life are fluid, allowing for different movements among and between actors in the creation and negotiation of trade contracts (Callon et al, 2005). Through this lens the market is conceived as horizontal rather than vertical: it is a play between agents as they constantly perform, shape and format the economy in local and particular situations (Callon 1998, Ong and Collier 2005, Maurer 2005). This science and technology studies inflected economic sociology challenges strict economic approaches that tend to assume a clear distinction between the realm of economy and the domain of political and ethical action and political economy approaches which tend to return to a notion of systemic rationality and order in the workings of the market. By contrast recent work has emphasized both the cultural embededness of market transactions (Miller 2001) and the ways in which regulatory mechanisms and accounting practices serve to distinguish what is considered inside and outside the realm of the market (Barry and Slater 2005).

The work of economic sociologists and anthropologists is complemented by recent studies of 'geographical flows' which open up the movement of products and capital to inquiry by suggesting the market works as a network of human and non-human actors (Thrift 2005; Whatmore 2002) and by literature that strives to disrupt the singularity and distinctiveness of the capitalist economy (Gibson-Graham 1996, 2006; Mitchell 2002).

In following what appears to be a discrete object called 'coffee' we find the "heterogeneous social networks that hold the object in shape" (Slater 2005). In this context, coffee is more than the product of agricultural processes. It is also the product of a *metrological process* which renders aspects of the production process measurable and visible (Callon 1998, Barry 2005), and it is the product of a *cultural process* of marketing and retailing which make this object useable as well as desirable. Coffee is not just a bean or a drink but is endowed with a political or social sentiment; its meaning is multiplied into potential, development, and sustainability. The demand for a good cup of coffee is coupled with information about the origins of the coffee and the social, political or ethical sensibilities of the consumer; ethics becomes simultaneously visible and commodified. All of this is relevant to an increasingly discerning public that is aware of the negotiations of the market and would like to understand their relation to the product they consume.

At the same time, the desire to condense the relations invested from producer through to export in a single label denoting a five-point set of standards abstracts and obscures the multitudes of everyday negotiations in the coffee world. These real-time negotiations are not found in the representations of ethics, the certification systems, and yet they are more persistently part of the exchange and the product itself. While ethical certifications and models using this language bring a set of humanitarian causes to the production site, people at various stages of the production process will choose how to engage with these models. The choice to obtain ethical certification is a choice to comply with a delimited set of standards comparable across countries, but how one engages with these standards is a result of the particular reality, history and relationships at the local level. Ethics are not found in the macro-arrangements encoded in institutions and standards, but rather are always already part of the people, places and things that live, work, process, measure, account for and name coffee (Callon 1998). Ethnography is paramount to this project. Through an ethnographic lens one can become part of the social and technical agencies at play that make up coffee as an industry opening the possibility of different modes of being ethical.

## III

This (global or multi-sited) ethnography draws on recent theorisations of global assemblages. Where traditional anthropology is single-sited, more recent ethnographies look at global phenomena as they are articulated in specific situations (Ong & Collier, 2005). This project begins from the premise that one must locate the object, in this case coffee, and to experience the interaction between ethics and coffee amongst the everyday realities, lives, technologies, organisation and administrative aspects that go into making this object functional through the supply chain. It is locating a 'meeting point' of global ideas (e.g. the market, trade, fairness) and how they are reproduced or challenged in daily life.

Both ethical certification programmes and actors working in coffee assume the singularity of the global market. This universalising tendency leaves the representation of the market fixed;

responses are placed on top of the existing 'problems', leaving the whole process intact. As Timothy Mitchell argues, "The act of representation, constantly repeated, makes [...] referents [...] appear as an object that exists prior to any representation, as something given, material, fixed in its unique time and space, not fissured by replication, not open to serialization and interlinking, and to the difference, instability, and misrepresentation that endless repetition might introduce" (Mitchell, 2000). To disentangle the layer of representation demands a reopening of the connections that have been glazed over to understand how players in the game of organising the coffee market *as well as* players organising the game of ethical trade reproduce, reify, challenge or resist being instrumental in the coffee market (and indeed in the ethics market). This is a process of following the connections between agents to see how elements of the relationship are negotiated day-to-day (Mitchell, 2002). Representations are set against real-time actions through in-depth observation and participation in the dialogues of coffee and ethics at the local level.

The fluid process of ethnography moves through each new contact or space, developing the next contact through reflection on new ideas that arise. Data collection is based on qualitative research methods involving establishing trust with contacts and research over a sustained period. Methods include observations and interactions, conversations, dialogue, collection of documents and unstructured interviews. This is necessarily a reflexive project as the researcher is guided by those being interviewed and is simultaneously affecting the research site. Initial interviews in the UK in autumn 2005 shape this ethnography through two excursions to Latin America in 2006 and 2007.

Interviews were conducted November 2005 through May 2006 with representatives of a cross-section of organizations working in the UK to bring sustainable coffee to consumption countries. Particular attention was given to those using the language of 'coffee' and 'ethics' in their promotional material or mission statements; terms like transparency, traceability, social responsibility and environmental conservation. These interviews provide insight into the key debates and the diversity of ethical initiatives.

Two research excursions to Latin America between June 2006 and June 2007 provide essential input for this production-focused project. From initial interviews in the UK and as this study focuses on the relationships of production from seed to export, Guatemala was identified as an excellent site for sustained in-depth field work. With more than 65,000 producers organised into eight growing regions with every form of ethical certification currently in circulation, numerous examples of direct sales, multitudes of non-governmental organizations working on coffee projects, and excellent ability to market their high quality coffee, Guatemala provides the perfect climate for a comparative analysis. During preliminary travel to Guatemala in June and July 2006 relationships were established with coffee producers in the region, local and international NGOs, the offices of ethical certifications and Anacafé, the non-governmental organisation supporting all coffee producers in the region. Brief excursions to El Salvador and Honduras provided insight into how Guatemala is understood as a coffee region among nearby coffee producing countries.

A return to Guatemala during the harvest season from January to June 2007 allowed the time required to become a participant in the coffee world. Established relationships with Anacafé, organisations working with producers who are certified under one or more certification scheme, access to the main offices of ethical certification organisations (e.g. Rainforest Alliance and Utz)

and relationships with people both Guatemalan and from coffee consuming countries interested in direct sales initiatives provided initial subjects for inquiry. The ethnographic research process is reflexive; an interplay between the choices of the researcher and those of research subjects. Plans made in the early stages of the ethnography while in the UK changed quickly once arriving in Guatemala in January demanding changes to the research scheme. These changes are seen as part of the research itself: how people respond to the research as well as tangible and intangible changes to the direction or progression of the research are not seen as roadblocks but rather part of the momentum or fluidity of the ethnography. These pose dilemmas that push the research in new ways as well as provide insight into the workings of the coffee world in Guatemala.

A contact on the board of directors of Anacafé provided a strong pull to Guatemala. As a non-governmental organisation, Anacafé supports all coffee producers, issues all coffee export licenses and provides resources and training for various stages of the production process. With its mission to support coffee producers in the country and to help internationals gain insight and information about Guatemalan coffee, Anacafé showed particular interest in this research. This research was seen by Anacafé as a way to gather objective and independent data and information in order to further define their own approach to ethical standards. In exchange, this relationship would provide access to people/resources, internal meetings and documentation and transportation.

While Anacafé showed initial interest in a partnership, an agreement was reached wherein Anacafé would provide hands-off support for the research project which was at times helpful and other times difficult to navigate. Closer ties to Anacafé would put the independence of the project at risk: if thought to be working with Anacafé the interviewees and informants would perceive the project quite differently. As a long-standing institution it is part of the history and politics endemic to the state and the social history of coffee in the country. On the other hand, Anacafé does seek to make the coffee industry more profitable which, of course, is to the benefit of coffee farmers in the country. A good working relationship with this institution so central to coffee in Guatemala is very important. Board members and the Gerente General of Anacafé provided support and contacts in the first months of the project. As a major player organising coffee in Guatemala, interactions with members of Anacafé, in particular members of the board of directors, provides interesting data about the way Anacafé functions in and among coffee-related production. The way Anacafé interacts with a researcher, is interested in and responds to demands about ethical certifications and how Anacafé is perceived by other actors in coffee in Guatemala are all part of the data collection. One board member suggested that rather than Anacafé being a 'partner' in the research project they could instead be a subject for the research and would like to be interviewed. Interestingly Anacafé was always a subject of the research as everything about the interactions with Anacafé is already part of how coffee and ethics function in Guatemala. Nothing is ever outside of the field of research.

This hands-off relationship with Anacafé opened up different and interesting avenues. In particular, due to safety and risk assessment, travelling alone in Guatemala without the aid of Anacafé seemed dangerous and therefore plans to travel through all eight coffee regions in Guatemala proved difficult. Travel would also limit the amount of depth possible. Beyond the usual security risks of an international in Guatemala (see www.fco.gov.uk on Guatemala) the figure of an independent female researcher requires particular risk assessment. Thus turning

attention to something more local, Antigua, a city an hour outside of the capital and a significant coffee region, became the focus of the research. While living in Antigua it became apparent that behind most of the beautifully painted doors in this old colonial town lived people intimately connected to coffee. The volcanoes surrounding this town are lined with coffee plantations large and small. Large and centralised processing units (beneficios), numerous middle-men buying and selling coffee, quality-hungry small roasters and many not-for-profit organisations working with coffee swarm the city. Myths and jokes abound about Antigua-type coffee. Antigua is the everyday choices and lives of people, things and techniques of coffee. Adding a further layer, Antigua is a major tourist base, full of Spanish schools and travellers young and old. Cafés in Antigua, sensing the growing tourist interest in coffee have responded with coffee tours and museums as well as the ability to buy 'local' coffee by the pound. It is common to hear tourists ask if the coffee is fairtrade, a past-time enjoyed from the front room of Fernando's Kaffee in Antigua. Representations of ethics and everyday ethics meet in the politically heated encounter between the 'coffee-aware' and/or 'ethically aware' tourist-consumer and the cafés and people of Antigua. It is this clash between the everyday and the representations which makes Antigua such a rich source of data.

Focusing on Antigua and keeping independent from Anacafé created a somewhat place-bound group cross-sectioned by individuals involved in coffee on a larger scale including American roasters, Fairtraders, or trading companies in the country. The in-depth relationships and insights including daily discussions about coffee or Guatemala as well as it being a favourite stopover for internationals working in coffee made Antigua invaluable. The ethnography tells a story about a small space within a very large coffee market and very powerful and popular modes of ethical living. It picks a place that appears to be one side of the chain, the 'production' side but meanwhile it is criss-crossed by the various agents (conceptual, human and non-human) that make up the global assemblage of coffee and ethics.

The coffee world is large and diverse. If we can imagine the complexities of 'ethics' in one coffee producing space and acknowledge the questions and problems that arise in the interaction between everyday decision-making and representations of ethics, then certainly it becomes possible to acknowledge the gaps in knowledge that must be addressed on a wider scale. Response to the researcher cannot be separated from the researcher herself (who she connects to, gender, age, etc.) and therefore the decisions made and the responses are intimately bound up with the particular person. What does remain possible and necessary is the importance of asking questions and of finding the agency that sustains or challenges representations. As Mitchell says, to put in question the assumptions about agency and history requires making the issue of power and agency a question, rather than known in advance (2002). As the questions become more advanced, more nuanced, so too are the responses. This may address the quite glaring gap between purchasing fair-trade coffee from your local supermarket and the farmer in Guatemala who roasts her coffee on her tortilla grill and has never heard of fair trade. Her family defines fairness in an entirely different way.

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