Symbolic values and the symbolic power of values

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Symbolic values and Fair Trade

Any consumer that has read a Fair Trade leaflet about how the system works, is aware that he or she is paying a higher price than for conventional products, as one of the FT mechanisms that enable the ‘third world’ producers to make a better deal.

This over-price is justified through the set of symbolic social and ecologic values that are a fundamental requirement the consumer is expecting the label agency to fulfil, as an assurance of right certification; but the labelling organisation continually monitors both the importer and the producer, and the cooperatives have their own rules on individuals’ participation. In short, values appear to be the reason that puts in motion and justifies the whole apparatus.

In the Fair Trade market, social and ecological values are opposed to the principles of the maximum bargain for the consumer, and maximum profit for the seller, which sustains the mainstream market, regardless of other facts such as quality, production conditions, distribution of profit etc.

The function of symbolic values, like solidarity, has not only been understood in terms of consumers’ consciousness demanding ‘respect for certain social values involved in production’ (Renard, 1999: 490-491). It is also part of the encouragement of an ‘identity driven consumption in which the brand purchased is viewed as an expression of one’s personality’, (Sud, 1998:40); or even as a key element of consumers’ education about ‘…other cultures, wider economic development, world trading regimes, and tariff discrimination…’ (Tiffen and Zadek, 1998:165), among others.

A. Gonzalez and T. Linck, for example, underline the role that symbolic values play in encouraging consumers’ solidarity by paying more for a product in order to make a difference to the peasant families’ life conditions. However, the authors argue, the definition of standards that validates the incorporation of ecologic and solidarity values is highly controversial (n/d).

In their analysis of the rules and ethical values of the Fair Trade market, Gonzalez and Linck critique the way the definition of ethical criteria seems to reproduce exclusion mechanisms, since the participation of the producers in decision-making is quite limited. Such standards, they argue, are assumed to be universal and established outside the logic and territory of the indigenous communities. Rather than consolidate a select group of producers that meet the precise criteria to reach sustainable development, a way should be found to assume the autonomy of producer groups to decide their own path to lead them to sustainable development, based in their own values system; otherwise the benefits of the overprice will continue to be limited to a small number of groups that meet the rules (n/d).
It is not specified how this could be carried out in concrete terms. It is also unclear whether if Gonzalez and Linck are aware of the above mentioned recent changes to FLO-International's board of Directors, which appoints the certification committee, an autonomous unit. The latter has representation from national initiatives, NGO's, external experts, traders and producers, and 'every producer organisation and trader has the right to appeal against a decision of the Certification Committee', (FLO-Int bulletin, 2002: 3).

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