Transnational Social Movements, Solidarity Values and the Grassroots: final considerations

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This paper has explored the points of convergence and digression of the Trade Justice Movement and the Fair Trade Market in Northern countries and the Mexican peasant project, through the framework of transnational social movements.

The northern initiatives appear to assume a natural narrative link with the grassroots character of the southern producers’ struggle for equal conditions of marketing. Other works have analysed the fairness and viability of the Fair Trade Market (Medina, 1997; Mace, 1998; etc), but the results are a complex and hard to reduce to a single answer. The alternative coffee market model has been criticised because its insertion into the mainstream rules has reproduced unequal economic relations by its reliance in some cases on the cash crops model, regarding the peasant as a mere provider of raw materials and basic foods for the North.

It has also been criticised for reproducing North-South power relations in certification procedures (Gonzalez and Linck, n/d); and for the limited size of the market niche, available to a limited portion of the southern producers. On the other hand it has been found that access to the fair coffee market is a very desirable outcome for the Mexican coffee producers (Mace, 1998) considered by scholars as the most reliable option for coffee producers even more reliable than organic production (Bartra, Cobo, Meza and Paz, n/d). There is a longstanding political claim that it provides small coffee producers with more certainty and more autonomy from speculative and corporate interests.

However the focus of this analysis is not so much on the extent of fairness of the ATOs’ contribution vis-à-vis the mainstream market. Given the emergence of a European-based movement focused on contesting macro-level causes of unequal relations in international trade, namely the Trade Justice Movement, the aim of the paper is to examine the levels of engagement of this movement and the Fair Trade market. It has looked not only at the current involvement of southern, grassroots, indigenous and peasant activists in the deployment of their strategies, and political activism.

In particular it has examined the extent to which the FT market and the TJM movements fit into the Mexican peasant project. The producers have endured political, social, and personal suffering within the authoritarian and corporate tradition of the Mexican political system during most of the 20th century. The dynamic character of the FT and TJM is considered a solid standpoint in common, in historical terms with the political and epistemological framing of the producers’ struggles that has shaped their claims through history.

The paper has concentrated on three main questions. First, is it viable to consider the ATOs activities as a ‘Fair Trade movement’, since old and new forms of collective action propose other ways of making trade fair, such as the Mexican peasant movements, and the European TJM?; Secondly, to what extent are the northern movements engaged with the actors for whom they claim they are advocating?; And finally, to what extent can values of the actors be seen as a unitary strategy and field of struggle, that permeates local and global networks, either as a means, as an end, or as a field of encounter between two opposing
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rationalities?

The current analytic literature regards the Fair Trade Market in terms of a Fair Trade Movement, whose members are playing active roles such as the Alternative Trade Organisations (local cooperatives, roasters, importers, labelling organisations, and conjunctions of them in networks, federations and so on), the consumers, and to a minor extent the producers.

The first point to consider is the use of the term ‘Movement’ without considering further whether or not the Fair Trade Market fits into conceptualisations of social movements. It is not the intention of this paper to further explore the elements that make up the Fair Trade Market, or contrast them with the available definitions of SMs; instead it is suggested that there are more actors than those considered so far in the first version of a Fair Trade Movement.

First, the peasants from southern countries, have struggled for decades in organized efforts facing poverty, repression, exclusion, and in many cases violence and humiliation from dominant groups in national contexts, in order to achieve autonomy in the production process, of which they are the main actors; access to fair markets is one of their critical demands for the authentic control of their social, cultural and political reproduction. Their demand for fair channels of marketing, has forced them to create their own structures of organization, in defiance of corporate control and anti-democratic apparatus of the party-state in post-revolutionary Mexico. They have resisted the penetration of the country side by capitalism, which was first adapted to local and national forms of corporate control, and later to the neo-liberal wave motivated from the World Bank/IMF, and undermined the existing social policies and common land tenancy structure at the heart of Mexican peasantry. For this reason the political organization of agricultural producers and its insertion in the Fair Trade Market scheme, should be included in any notion of Fair Trade Movement. It is included in the definition of the Trade Justice Movement, which was set up by the NGOs that have combined their efforts to lobby against the way international trade rules have been shaped to increase the gap between the rich and the poor, as part of a broader movement against both the globalisation of neo-liberal policies and the increasing influence of corporate capital on international politics.

The engagement on the ground of transnational initiatives among these three actors, namely peasants, FT market, and TJM, configures a new conceptualisation of a Fair Trade Movement. There seem to be more links between northern initiatives, which have in common the presence of ATOs within their constituencies, than between North and South. The relation between peasants and ATOs, established by the Fair Trade Market, is limited to the number of producers inserted into the FT niche. To a lesser extent there seem to be connections between the Trade Justice Movement and southern actors, limited to the particular links that the NGOs members have with third world countries according to their own agendas. A dialogue, debate or feedback between the Trade Justice Movement and grassroots movements from the south is a key issue needing more attention. So far it seems limited to direct exchanges among local activists, or the participation of leading representatives of social movements in parts of the third world in the meetings and demonstrations, such as the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee in South Africa (Trevor Ngwane), at the WDM rally where the TJM was officially launched; the Third World Network in Penang, Malaysia (Martin Khor), and the African Gender and Trade Network (Mohau Pheko), in WDM’s 2002 annual conference in London; the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology in India (Vandana Shiva), at the TJM rally and Mass Lobby of Parliament in June 19th 2002 (Lines, personal
communication, August 2002).

The TJM is a young coalition addressing the macro-structural causes of poverty, rather than the national, regional and local issues with the social movements from the South are concerned, and there is a long way to walk. Nonetheless an increasing number of grassroots movements and citizens’ initiatives within the developing countries are addressing the broad spectrum of the political economy as a critical factor in local problems. It is here that a convergence with the northern movements should be sought, in order to construct a channel for dialogue between North and South that doesn’t reproduce the same international inequalities that exist within the social movement structures. These kinds of links based on cooperation, could continue the process initiated by the Fair Trade Market, which in many cases appears to have helped poor producers to achieve what their past struggles and any government efforts couldn’t do before: to reward peasants’ production. Did peasants ever imagine they would find fair prices for their products coming from overseas in a globalizing and increasing neo-liberal environment, rather than in their nationalist and protectionist policies?. This irony should cause some reflection around the role of transnational solidarity mobilization.

Thirdly and finally, the role of values has been highlighted as, first, a field of struggle, because besides the battle over physical resources, tangible and political strategies, there is a conceptual struggle for the prevalence of a certain view of the world, an epistemological challenge that aims for the dominance of one paradigm over another through the management and use of values. Such principles can serve either as a strategy to get to the consciousness of public opinion and the decision makers, or also as the end that motivates mobilization. In the case of Transnational Solidarity Movements such as the TJM, an attempt has been made to supersede the penetration of capitalist and neo-liberal values such as competition, individual effort, personal success, accumulation, consumption for its own sake, the law of the market, the pre-eminence of the majorities etc, with the adoption of opposing terms such as solidarity, cooperation, identity, substitution, complementarity, reciprocity, affinity, restitution, conscious consumption, consideration for minorities, equity, self-sufficiency, and so on. In this sense values are part of social movements both as a means and as an end. As a strategy to convince, and as a goal in its own right.

In the case of Fair Trade a kind of feedback can be distinguished in the use of certain values shared by the ATOs policies and the grassroots producers. For example, the current idea of organic production emerged in response to the damaging effects of agrochemicals on long term soil fertility, and knowledge of it is based in a set of technical skills possessed by agronomists and other professional technicians. Nonetheless it does not contradict the traditional ecological knowledge of the indigenous people for whom the green revolution has not represented an alternative to the ancestral agriculture systems that still persist. The same applies to the rest of the set criteria required by the FT labelling agencies to certify producers, such as democratic organization, which still is practiced by some indigenous groups of Mexico, specially in Oaxaca, despite the patron-client relations scheme imposed by the post-revolutionary government for most of the 20th century. Nonetheless FT criteria that resonate with indigenous producers’ principles and demands, such as participatory democracy, sustainable use of natural resources, better conditions of production, access to the market and technical assistance, etc, are sometimes framed by broader political demands of autonomy, self-determination, struggle for land, and food sovereignty, among others, which are not addressed by the Fair Trade Market model. Here lies the importance of challenging the North’s Fair Trade efforts to address such topics. However, a critical approach can be adopted also toward the oligarchic practices of indigenous groups and their political movements.
Likewise, the presence of the Churches (in a variety of denominations) is highly visible in the formation and adoption of moral values within transnational, and grassroots movements. The Churches have been considered among the first transnational movements, and their experience in moving through political channels and getting to the heart of local, poor, excluded and/or indigenous communities should not be disregarded, nor the role they play in confrontational transnational politics. Their work has been relevant for the launching of UCIRI in Oaxaca Mexico (e.g. the work of missionaries), the Trade Justice Movement (Christian Aid, CAFOD, the United Reformed Church, Methodist Relief and Development Fund, and so on), and the Alternative Trade Market (The former Central Mennonite Committee, Oxfam trading, Max Havelaar). Thus, their contribution to the addition of values to the social movements background, is added to the traditional values of indigenous communities, the humanist values of western organisations and their constituencies, and the opposition to the domination of western corporate values that foster social processes of inequality, among others. In this sense a valid social movement can hardly be imagined without engagement with the ground, and the yielding of values that epistemologically sustain its claims. A model based in ethics will be more likely to replace a model based in corporate selfishness.