THE POLITICS OF BANANAS: MODERN SLAVERY AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF MORALITY

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ABSTRACT

Men can coexist on condition that they recognize each other as being all equally, though differently, human, but they can also coexist by denying each other a comparable degree of humanity, and thus establishing a system of subordination.

— Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*

The choices we make in our daily lives have consequences that span the oceans: many consumers are not aware that some of the most exotic foods which belong to our breakfast plates every single day, such as coffee or chocolate, have a profound impact on the lives of many people. In Western societies, we are used to eating and consuming fresh ingredients which sprout on a different continent, yet we are unable to see the very hands that carry a simple thing as a banana to our tables, as a consequence of a global supply chain. This alienation from the places and people involved in the supply chain leads consumers to ignore the impact of producing some foods and enabling them to travel all the way to one's table. What is regarded as a simple commodity, in fact, is a result of the labour and exploitation of many families and crops on the other side of the ocean.

Modern slavery comes in many guises and is often obscured by the alienation of modern consumers from their products, an example of which includes the slave system that holds many people tied behind our food chains. As consumers, we unconsciously become commissioners of a system of inequality and exploitation which we ignore. This includes many 'fair-trade' certified products, which are employed by multinationals as a psychological marketing tactic. This phenomenon is described by the cultural anthropologist Richard Robbins (2013) as the 'commodification of morality', where even commitments to just, fair or sustainable practices have been monopolised by economic agents. Within this framework, our moral choices are put on the market with a price which rarely returns or reflects the true cost of such products. This article begins by defining modern slavery, proceeding with a particular focus on forced labour in the current neoliberal regime. This is then contextualised in the case study of bananas as one of the most consumed, yet furthest grown, items of Western diets. The article then analyses the ethical backdrop of economic practices, using the fair-trade movement as a synecdoche of the moral economy of our day. The main question raised within this analysis is to what extent our moral choices can contribute to exploitation or to social change, and how our way of eating can oppose the great inequalities that still exist in the present context.

INTRODUCTION

The choices we make in our daily lives have consequences that span the oceans: many consumers are not aware that some of the most exotic foods which belong to our breakfast plates every single day, such as coffee or chocolate, have a profound impact on the lives of many people. In Western societies, we are used to eating and consuming fresh ingredients which sprout on a different continent, yet we are unable to see the very hands that carry a simple thing as a banana to our tables, as a consequence of a global supply chain. This alienation from the places and people involved in the supply chain leads consumers to ignore the impact of producing some foods and enabling them to travel all the way to one's table. What is regarded as a simple commodity, in fact, is a result of the labour and exploitation of many families and crops on the other side of the ocean.

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THE POLITICS OF MODERN SLAVERY

MODERN SLAVERY

The term 'modern slavery' has been utilised as a broad but controversial definition which incorporates many forms of exploitation of people. Since the Western abolition of slavery in the twentieth century, slavery has not vanished but has adapted and taken on different forms which have shaped our contemporary demographics and political-legislative realities.

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According to the researcher and community activist Gary Craig, slavery has changed to better accommodate an increasingly industrialised and globalised world where the migration of people to new contexts contributes to exacerbating their vulnerability to enslavement (Craig et al, 2019). Today, slaves can be defined as people who are held captive and coerced to work without compensation, and can be grouped in three main categories, as subdivided by the researcher and activist Siddharth Kara: bonded labour, trafficked slaves and forced-labour slaves (Kara, 2017). These include different sorts of phenomena, ranging from very modern practices to continuous historical ones such as debt bondage, serfdom, human trafficking, sex slaves, forced marriage or organ harvesting. Although abolished in name, slavery persists within modern society: an example of this, as the CEO of Anti-Slavery International, Jasmine O'Connor states, is 'the rate of children British trafficked in the UK [which] has more than doubled in a year.' (Craig et al, 2019). The lack of awareness and the weak political discussion regarding these hidden chains, which are often overshadowed by the stature of history, have made all these individuals not only silent but also invisible.

FORCED LABOUR AND THE ROLE OF BUSINESS

With the proliferation of free trade, global value chains and multinational corporations, economic practices have extended to include ethical approaches (such as corporate responsibility or environmental standards) in business supply chains. Historically, the protection of human rights was the responsibility of the state; however, as businesses have gained more power outside of the control of international laws, they have been able to invest in practices that do not make them legally accountable nor require a moral commitment for the provision of responsible and transparent behaviours. This has led to appalling work conditions, wages and contracts for workers, which often include the exploitation of children or women in precarious occupations for salaries below the minimum wage, as well as unsustainable abuse of resources and environment (Craig et al, 2019).

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), forced labour is 'all work or service which is exacted from any person under the threat of a penalty and for which the person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily.' In estimates by the ILO, at least 20.9 million people were victims of forced labour in 2012, 90% of which were subjected to individuals or enterprises in the private economy (ILO, 2012). Furthermore, profits per slave generally range from a few thousand to a few hundred thousand dollars a year, with total profits estimated to reach $150 billion (ILO, 2014). The market for forced labour surpasses all others both in supply and demand, promoting a low-cost manufacture to maximise profits and pressuring suppliers to provide the cheapest products (Banerjee, 2021). Today, most industries which dominate our Western world, from mining to textile industries to coffee and cocoa harvesting, are able to profit thanks to the exploitation of forced labourers. As consumers, it is our moral duty to be aware of the conditions and injustice involved in the production of foods such as chocolate, coffee and bananas, as some of the closest to our everyday lives.

THE CASE OF BANANAS

The banana industry presents itself as a clear case to explore how, politically and historically, one fruit can change the economic and ecological reality of many people. This case highlights how morality is deeply embedded in the food choices we make, which always affect and interact with a wider environment. The following analysis addresses some botanical and environmental factors which are structural to the cultivation of this plant and preliminary to its economic understanding before attending to the socio-political consequences for communities who cultivate bananas at a local level, as well as communities which import and consume these after their journey.

Native to South-East Asia and brought to South America in the sixteenth century by Portuguese colonisers, bananas are fruits of the world's largest herbs which come in approximately 1,000 different types (Rainforest Alliance, 2012). In the twentieth century, these are cultivated predominantly in Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Caribbean islands. The most prominent in export trade and the variety most commonly found in Western supermarkets is the Cavendish banana, which is the fruit of a long process of domestication which made it compatible to its environment and more resilient to the climate. Nonetheless, as banana production is based on genetically restricted and inflexible clones, this monoculture is particularly sensitive to pests, diseases, and ecological change (Perrier et al, 2011). For instance, the plant has remained vulnerable to the black sigatoka disease, which alone requires fifty aerial sprays and threatens the health of workers, soil and water. This cultivation also comes with the risks of unsustainable practices and the reduction of bananas' agrobiodiversity as a species (van Niekerk, 2018). Although there have been some successful attempts in induced mutations and genetic modifications to make bananas more disease-resistant, these remain merely technological fixes: instead, we argue that what should be changed is our relationship with food and the food production system itself.

The economy of bananas includes many countries in spite of its specific geographies. In fact, the EU and the US are the biggest importers of bananas, accounting for an annual average of 57% of global imports, as of 2017 (FAO, 2017). Bananas are also the second most sold product in UK supermarkets. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), only 15% of the total banana production is traded on the international market, while the rest is retained locally and constitutes a great part of people's diets. Considering the fact that half a billion people rely on bananas for half of their daily calorie intake, particularly in countries such as Uganda and Cameroon, bananas contribute not only to food security, but also to substantial household income in many countries such as Ecuador or Costa Rica (FAO, 2017).

Inevitably, the incredible demand for this product by supermarkets in the West has a great impact on the food sovereignty of many local communities. Food sovereignty is defined by Jaci van Niekerk (2018), in her research regarding the inauspicious development of a "new" transgenic fruit, as 'the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems'. Our demands for products which have large environmental and social impact enables slavery's assault on human dignity on an individual, but also communal dimension as entire communities become unable to provide the necessities for themselves and for this reason become dependent on external bodies. For this reason, it is crucial to frame this issue within local food and cultural systems, also recognising that malnutrition and hunger are not merely technical or biological issues but social problems originating from poverty, inequality, and an unfair distribution of resources. Ending hunger or promoting food sovereignty thus cannot be limited to a matter of gene transfers (van Niekerk, 2018), but must aim to address socio-economic and agroecological aspects first. These bio-technical approaches must be implemented and followed in parallel by socio-ecological considerations, such as land ethics or the empowerment of farmers and women, that reconnect them to

the local dimension, otherwise they may risk undermining local food systems or traditional cultures.

In a 2008 interview by Lesley Grant, the manager of banana growers' association in St. Vincent and Grenadines Speaks of the human cost of 'cheap' bananas produced in Latin America, compared with the better conditions of the small-scale, family-run Caribbean banana industry. In his words:

> All of this nonsense you hear of 'cheap' [bananas]. Someone has to pay upfront. They have to pay in blood or in terms of poverty. Because the person who comes and works for you for less than a US dollar a day, he is giving you his wealth. He is giving you the wealth of his children. (Fridell, 2011)

The cost of large-scale farming, as opposed to smaller productions, is stimulated by global demand and economic competition, thus a driver of strife and insecurity for many local families and communities. In fact, although Latin America and the Caribbean islands are the main producers of bananas, they present very different histories and models of production. In the Winward Islands of the Caribbean, for example, bananas provided one-third of all employment as well as half of their export earnings, before the World Trade Organisation (WTO) rules promoted global free-trade at the human cost of the islands' small economy in 2005 (Myers, 2004). Through the dismantling of the EU-Caribbean agreement, where the EU removed non-tariff measures designed to enable this trade, communities were marginalised and the attempt to alleviate poverty and promote development though preferential treatments was abandoned by Western countries (Fridell, 2011). This became a problem from a Caribbean perspective, as the industry would not have been able to compete with the cheaper bananas of Latin America.

The fair-trade movement therefore helped revitalise the banana industry in these smaller and more vulnerable countries in the face of the free market (Robbins, 2013). On the other hand, fair-trade companies dominate the market with very little commitment to ethical standards, such as the international company Chiquita, involved with the destruction of democratic movements in Latin America and perhaps also implicated in the overthrow of the democratically elected Guatemalan government in 1954 (Robbins, 2013). The case of bananas shows how the moral behaviours of markets can profoundly affect the biology as much as the social or environmental aspects of a place.

THE FAIR-TRADE MOVEMENT

Fair trade appears to dominate the modern market in an effort of moral amelioration. However, the ethical foundations of this market approach have transformed throughout time to the point this is compatible with businesses' logic of profit. Fair trade involves an attempt to combat inequalities and establish a network of solidarity, particularly between poor and rich countries, through ethical trade standards. In order to be officially considered fair-trade, goods must be produced by poor communities through cooperative democratic organisations and employ sustainable means for both workers and the environment (Fridell, 2007). Yet, as supported by Robbins (2013), it is currently questioned whether fair-trade certifications Should be extended to multinationals or not. The dangers of doing so include the possibility of companies such as Starbucks or Nestlé, renowned for their very low standards, selling themselves as socially responsible bodies while in fact committing to very little (Robbins, 2013).

The fair-trade movement was born in Latin America, to Liberation Theology priests and radical-liberal groups in Europe and the US. This was intended to represent a combination of Christian and liberal values directed towards labour, human rights and social justice (Lyon and Moberg, 2010). As presented in Gavin Fridell's history of the fair-trade coffee market, this developed as an alternative network of trade organisations in the 1940s and 1950s. The fair-trade labelling system was consequently introduced in the 1980s, in the hopes of inducing bigger corporations to keep up with 'ethical consumer' markets in the West (Fridell, 2007). However, although producers of fair-trade coffee received higher wages than conventional producers, the difference was not enough to lift them out of poverty. This also came at the cost of increased labour, awareness of environmental impacts and a longer-term commitment for the workers, expected to carry a heavier burden of responsibilities (Robbins, 2013).

The fair-trade movement today labels many common foods on the market. In spite of its moral foundations, to many this appears to be consistent with a neoliberal agenda, which defends the self-regulation of markets as the best way to promote social and environmental solutions as if they were commodities. In fact, according to Paige West (2012) in her analysis of New Guinea organic coffee production, fair-trade coffee is neoliberal coffee. This is because the farmer is seen as an object of empowerment whilst the consumer is the agent of such empowerment (Robbins, 2013). The exercise of responsibility is thus cast only on one side of the supply chain, prioritising the consumer's moral comfort at the expense of the producer. By putting a price on fair wages, democratic means and sustainable practices, fair-trade certifications are merely commodifying morality.

MORAL CONSIDERATIONS

THE COMMODIFICATION OF MORALITY

As consumers proceed through their meals, biting into another banana or sipping fair-trade coffees, many remain unaware of the slavery that is woven into the fabric of their daily lives, blinded by an economy of ignorance. What has been defined by Richard Robbins as the 'commodification of morality', echoing the words of both Fisher and Henrici (2013), represents a marketing strategy to increase the value and profit margin of final products at the end of their supply chain. Our commitments to fair trade should not aim to merely serve people's consciences in this moral commodification, where they are able to buy their way out of the gap between morals and actions, but rather to provide a real positive impact, which today is clearly not fulfilled by fair-trade certifications.

Returning to the ethics that underpin fair trade, which were originally rooted in Catholic social thought (Robbins, 2013), the correlation of consumption and communion is an important factor to consider as individuals have a moral obligation to think about their eating habits and shape practices in relation to their impact on others. According to the theologian and social ethicist Julie Hanlon Rubio, this could be interpreted in a theological perspective where consumers find themselves compelled to consider their personal role in global economic systems in which humans are exploited, and ensure that their actions are 'not contributing to the maintenance of evil, when they could be contributing to the good' (Rubio, 2016).

The question of food justice must be interrogated on many levels: it departs from the preference, taste, or nutritional needs of any individual and approaches a communal dimension. Here, shared meals become a site of hospitality and solidarity, as well as ethical deliberation, creating strong foundations for these to

interconnect with the global context. In this way, one's personal and local choices are capable of shaping the lives of people on the other side of the world. In the twenty-first century, the role of educated consumers is thus crucial in the larger project of human liberation (Flores, 2018). A critical understanding of the places and commodity chains that our foods have to cross before coming to our plates is essential to empower and unchain individuals from their unawareness, as well as promoting a more positive relationship with producers and local communities. Through action, which should coherently accompany one's moral choices, one is able to transform from a consumer to an agent of positive change. These considerations regarding our table ethics are crucial not merely "to eat our way to justice" (Flores, 2018), but rather to change the moral psychology of an economic order which is governed, in the words of Flores, by 'the tragedy of consumer participation in the enslavement of others in the name of economic freedom' (Flores, 2018).

PROSPECTS

After evaluating both the economic and moral implications of our consumption, particularly through the case of bananas, it is essential to realise that the (im)morality of actions contributes to many social issues and that food choices, more specifically, contribute to the maintenance of slavery. Solutions to modern slavery and market behaviours which enable the phenomenon must be found at multiple levels concomitantly, starting from the macropolitical and descending to the micropolitical. The reliance on moral solutions alone will not function if these are not also implemented at a macropolitical level, where the imperatives of profit maximisation and cost minimisation can fundamentally influence decision-making at a governmental level. The defence of social standards and welfare for both poorer and richer countries must be implemented with the same rigour, something that has not been applied to Western corporations who would otherwise not agree to participate in fair trade (Fridell, 2007).

As Pogge (2005) claimed, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) is ruled by a handful of developed countries implementing policies that profoundly impact poorer countries. He believes that the hypocrisy of these global institutions, who downplay the severity of hunger and rather commit to minor charitable assistance, is a direct cause of global poverty. Change must happen not to include poorer countries within the neoliberal development project, but to structurally change the way in which countries interact with each other across the global North-South divide, promoting an economy that is able to produce wellbeing for all rather than profit for few. This should also happen at a theoretical level, where more developed countries engage in research which could potentially benefit the poor (such as research on drought-resistant crops) rather than simply giving food aid in case of a natural disaster (Ouko, 2009). This approach can help some countries become more self-reliant, not merely relying on export as a fundamental source of income.

At a macropolitical level, consumers must demand more accountability from the companies that produce their products in a way that goes beyond mere corporate social responsibility, through the introduction of third parties such as the judiciary. In this way, ethical discourse cannot be contradicted by corporate praxis, as happens with fair-trade certifications or 'greenwashing' advertisement where companies deceptively portray themselves as environmentally friendly for marketing purposes, and extreme biases and conflicts of interest can be avoided in an adequate way (Jones, 2019). Thus, ethical consumerism must not become a substitute for the civic action which is needed to create effective change through a change in governmental regulation at a national level. As well as this, it is crucial to note that the neglect of social relations of production is also followed by a failure to address unequal gender relations (Fridell, 2007). It is of utmost importance to note that the discrimination of women underlies every other form of discrimination. For this reason, the empowerment and protection of women's rights must also be addressed as a fundamental issue in the food and agriculture supply chain. Therefore, civil society and intergovernmental organisations have a fundamental role to play in the greater political framework, demanding transparency and ensuring that political-economic institutions do not promote harm to farmers and producers in developing countries. Only through what Gavin Fridell defines as a 'democratic political process' (Fridell, 2007), producers and consumers can be given equal say and equal responsibility for decisions regarding the production and distribution of goods; something that is denied within the limitations of the global market.

Ethical reflections must take into account that food is a basic human right which requires a combination of political decisions, technological solutions, social cooperation and individual actions to be ensured (Ouko, 2009). At an individual level, consumers must engage in informed practices, engaging with products that avoid moral commodification and advance positive impacts. As described by Benjamin Garner in his research on farmers' markets (2015), these sites of direct farmer-customer relationships enable for community ties and social interactions to flourish in ways that are able to resist commodification. Through a sense of geographic embeddedness, consumers are able to reconnect to the natural environment and appreciate the specificities of their land through distinctive local products. As well as this, buying foods close to their sources promotes active engagement with the producers and consequently fosters a stronger sense of community, which is by nature 'contingent and not commodifiable' (Garner, 2015). Although the fair-trade movement originally attempted to construct such moral economy, moving away from the market to promote micro-interactions within and between communities, this has currently diverted towards the model of 'isolated consumers' (Fridell, 2007) due to neoliberal constraints. In an economic order driven by consumption, it will always be possible to purchase morality through ethical products: for this reason, it is crucial to cultivate alternative market models founded on mutual communication and collaborative human relationships, which are inherently non-commodifiable. In this way, local food systems such as farmers' markets, local businesses and social enterprises become spaces of constructive economic interdependence between consumers and producers, on both an ethical and social dimension. The individual and global dimensions must be interlocked through the local: by promoting smaller systems of food production and trade, along with a community-based approach to food, the individual can develop an integral food ethic and the current global order of human domination and exploitation can be changed.

To conclude, it is essential to recognise one's role in the greater social and environmental picture. As consumers in the capitalist system, it is then of utmost importance that one's practices promote local trade, direct relationships on the market and aim to avoid services which do not in fact reflect the social and environmental cost of production. It is crucial to remember that when one is not paying for this, someone else is (Fridell, 2011). Indeed, as modern slavery presents itself as the systematic denial of human agency, one's ethical responses should aim to re-evaluate consumptive choices on an individual dimension, through reflection, understanding and responsibility, and promote new forms of interaction on a social dimension, through solidarity, mutuality and active democratic

participation. It is the duty of all citizens who proclaim themselves against injustice and oppression to be aware of the hidden chains that still hold individuals hostage to the economy and question what small steps one can take towards an alternative market model that values people over consumption.

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