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Fair Trade and Eastern Caribbean Banana Farmers: Rhetoric and Reality in the Anti-Globalization Movement

Mark Moberg

With the impending removal of tariff quotas that formerly guaranteed access to the UK market, the Eastern Caribbean banana industry faces the prospect of direct price competition with cheaper Latin American bananas. Some farming communities in the region have embraced Fair Trade as an alternative marketing strategy. Certified Fair Trade farmers receive higher prices than do conventional growers, as well as a social premium for local development. In exchange, they must conform to extensive social and environmental criteria. This article compares the rhetorical claims of the Fair Trade movement with the experiences of Fair Trade farmers on St. Lucia. By examining the price differential between conventional and Fair Trade fruit and appropriateness of certifying criteria, I offer a preliminary assessment of Fair Trade as a form of anti-globalization politics.

Key words: globalization, bananas, Fair Trade, Eastern Caribbean

Can you bite into your favorite chocolate bar and enjoy the pleasurable taste and feel with the knowledge that some people may have suffered intolerably in its production? And can you drink your morning tea or coffee with satisfaction when the plantation worker earns 20p [US .40] a day? [Buyers of Fair Trade Products] said it was much nicer to eat or drink a product without visualizing miserable boy slaves or exhausted women and men growing it or picking it for you and living in dire conditions.

Middleton Guardian, UK, October 8, 2003

The international Fair Trade movement represents a major departure from conventional methods of marketing agricultural commodities from countries of the South. Fair Trade initiatives challenge the arrangements under which many tropical food crops are produced and in their place encourage more socially- and environmentally-sustainable agriculture. They do so by marketing agricultural goods grown by family farmers, cooperatives, and ethically-run commercial farms as certified Fair Trade products. Consumers in the developed North pay more for such items than they would for the mass produced commodities distributed by global agribusiness corporations. The higher retail prices of Fair Trade goods in turn maintain higher producer prices for family farmers and living wages on larger enterprises. In addition, Fair Trade products are grown with a minimum of pesticide use under practices that maintain the integrity of watersheds and topsoils. Discursively, Fair Trade initiatives seek to define the relationship between consumers and producers in personalistic and reciprocal terms in place of the priorities of price and quantity that have historically governed market relations. In short, the Fair Trade movement claims to privilege the interests of small-scale producers and the environment over agribusiness corporations by encouraging alternatives to the socially- and ecologically-destructive practices of large-scale agriculture (Raynolds 2000).

The marketing of Fair Trade produce in the United States is largely confined to non-supermarket retailers, coffeehouses, and mail-order and on-line firms, still representing a minor, albeit growing, component of all imported commodities. In the United Kingdom, however, the Fair Trade movement has grown dramatically in recent decades, and now commands a sizeable share of all supermarket sales of coffee, cocoa and chocolate, tea, bananas, and other items. The recent liberalization of the global banana trade provides an opportunity to assess whether Fair Trade marketing can indeed sustain small-scale farming. The United Kingdom has long been the primary destination for bananas grown in the Eastern

Mark Moberg is a Professor of Anthropology at the University of South Alabama. *Support for this research has been provided by the National Science Foundation (grant BCS-0003965) and the University of South Alabama Research Council, both of which are gratefully acknowledged. The author also acknowledges with thanks the research contributions of Tawnya Sesi Moberg and her comments on an earlier draft of this article. He also expresses his appreciation to the many farmers and industry participants in the Eastern Caribbean and Great Britain who have facilitated this research.*

Caribbean, yet the region's family farmers are threatened by the impending elimination of tariff-quota preferences that secured them a share of the UK's market in the past. These threats originate in large part from the Chiquita corporation, on whose behalf the U.S. and Latin American governments challenged the tariff-quota system before the World Trade Organization. For many in the Caribbean, Chiquita's attempt to expand its sales by eliminating trade preferences for family farmers represents globalization in its most destructive guise. In the wake of the WTO ruling, Fair Trade marketing offers Caribbean farmers the only alternative to direct price competition with more cheaply produced bananas from Central and South America.

This article offers a preliminary assessment of Fair Trade marketing among banana producers on the Eastern Caribbean island of St. Lucia, from which Fair Trade fruit has been exported since 2000. The article is based on continuing research on the Windwards Islands banana industry, a project that has thus far entailed interviews and participant observation on St. Lucia in May, 2000, October, 2002, and July-August, 2003. During the latter period, interviews were also conducted with Fair Trade officials on the island of St. Vincent. Finally, this article also draws upon interviews with retail executives and industry representatives in London and Portsmouth, England, in March, 2003. In all, the project has involved semi-structured interviews with 73 participants in the Windwards Islands banana industry. Of these, four are involved in UK-based retailing of Fair Trade and conventional fruit, 29 are based in the Windwards and involved in island-wide Fair Trade, industry, or government affairs, and the remainder are growers in the Mabouya Valley Fair Trade Group and Grace Fair Trade Group on St. Lucia. In all instances, informants were selected via snowball sampling from initial contacts made with industry representatives in the Windward Islands and Great Britain.

From this research, it will be seen that Fair Trade status does offer substantial material benefits to Caribbean farmers, but that many of the movement's rhetorical claims have yet to be realized on the ground. Most scholarly and journalistic treatments of Fair Trade have examined the movement in terms of its stated premises and objectives. Discursively, Fair Trade advocates in the developed world regard the movement as a democratic and sustainable alternative to the globalization of corporate power. Left unproblematized in such accounts are the relations between producers' associations in the developing world and the agencies and officials who confer Fair Trade status upon them. As will be seen, Eastern Caribbean farmers must satisfy a daunting set of social and environmental criteria for their fruit to be marketed as Fair Trade produce. These criteria originate not with the farmers themselves, but with the European NGO that recognizes them—or withholds such recognition—as Fair Trade producers. Because such criteria enjoy little local precedent and often require costly departures from longstanding social and agricultural practices, it may come as little surprise that the social equity claims made by Fair Trade's advocates in the developed world are not always paralleled by its producers in the South. Indeed, many Fair Trade banana producers perceive aspects of the marketing networks and attendant obligations in which they are now involved as little different from the economic dependence that they experienced in the past.

Such experiences raise broader questions about the international Fair Trade movement as a catalyst for challenging globalization. Ultimately, the movement is based on a paradox in its attempt to marshal the forces of the market against the market's own logic of global price competition. How is a form of politics based ultimately on individual consumer preference to be understood relative to other new social movements—as a characteristically postmodern manifestation of social concern, or as a decisive break with the condition of postmodernity? Does it herald a significant challenge to and disruption of a global trading system that delivers commodities to the developed North? Or is it anti-globalization politics in illusory form, a mechanism whereby educated and affluent consumers may continue to enjoy those commodities while divesting themselves of guilt? Preliminary answers to such questions may be gained by examining how Fair Trade affects those that it purports to help.

Fair Trade and the Challenge to Global Agribusiness

Relatively inconspicuous in the midst of recent mass political protests against globalization, the Fair Trade movement has quietly challenged global agribusiness on the market's own terms. The Fair Trade movement is an outgrowth of several European and North American initiatives since the 1960s that have attempted to redefine the goals of trade with developing countries. Historically, agribusiness has sought to maximize profits from its sales of agricultural commodities produced in the South, leading to a long-term decline in producer prices for most agricultural commodities and in wages for those employed in their production. As long ago as the 1930s, Kepner and Soothill (1935) documented the myriad strategies whereby North American banana companies attempted to source fruit at the lowest possible cost. Among these were the bribery of national officials to lessen or waive export taxes, predatory pricing to secure marketing monopolies, the violent disruption of strikes, and incitement of ethnic strife among banana workers (see also Bourgois 1989; Moberg 1997; Striffler 2002). Comparable practices and socioeconomic consequences have been documented in recent years for most tropical commodities consumed in the developed North, including coffee (Roseberry et al. 1995), cacao (Hill 1986), and tea (Chatterjee 2002). In contrast to the priorities of profit maximization that motivate agribusiness, Fair Trade organizations approach the marketing of agricultural goods from the South as a mechanism of sustainable development. They eschew producers that engage in unfair pricing, labor repression, or environmental degradation. Fair Trade is thus one manifestation of a longstanding form of market-based politics by which consumers organize their

preferences to either promote progressive social change or to boycott economic entities implicated in social injustice.

In its early years, the Fair Trade movement operated informally through international aid NGOs such as OXFAM in the United Kingdom and SOS-Kinderdorf in the Netherlands. These organizations began marketing the handicrafts and textiles of artisans from the disadvantaged South directly to consumers in the North. By bypassing the chain of middlemen who had traditionally absorbed the largest share of the retail price for handicrafts, these alternative trade organizations could offer artisans higher returns for their labor. Marketing initiatives along similar lines were later developed for food products (primarily coffee and tea), which were soon paralleled by the alternative trade group Equal Exchange in the United States. By the late 1980s, three alternative trade organizations, TransFair, Max Havelaar, and Fairtrade Mark, began labeling goods as Fair Trade products to promote their broader distribution through conventional retail outlets throughout Europe. The efforts of these regionally separate organizations were brought together in 1997 under the Fairtrade Labeling Organizations International (FLO). Based in Germany, FLO is responsible for reconciling differing standards among the organizations, creating a unified Fair Trade market, and certifying Fair Trade producers in the South (Raynolds 2000). As part of its effort to broaden the market, FLO introduced a common logo in 2002 for display on the packaging of the Fair Trade products that it certifies.

By 2004, rights to utilize FLO's Fair Trade logo had been issued as licenses to 443 importers or retailers of certified Fair Trade goods (FLO 2004). Embedded in the logo are the words "Fair Trade guarantees a better deal for producers." Accordingly, producers of FLO-certified Fair Trade goods receive a price above prevailing world market prices for their crops. At a minimum, this price is calculated to cover the farmers' costs of production, even if the world market price fails to do so. In addition, Fair Trade producers generate a social premium corresponding to the amount of goods that they sell under the Fair Trade label. These earnings are returned to the Fair Trade producers' association to which the farmer belongs and are invested in community development or environmental projects devised by the association. According to FLO (Ibid.), 315 producers' associations, representing a total of 900,000 farmers and workers in 40 countries, are currently recognized as Fair Trade producers.

To the present date, FLO has developed certification standards for coffee, tea, cocoa, fresh fruit, sugar, honey, and orange juice, and is the process of expanding certification to some manufactured goods, including sports balls. Certification requires that Fair Trade producers adhere to a set of general social and environmental criteria, which vary depending upon the nature of the commodity and the scale of the enterprise that produces it. For small-scale farmers to receive Fair Trade certification they must belong to democratically-established producers' associations or formal cooperatives. Alternately, if products originate on larger commercial farms or privately-owned businesses, workers in those firms must be represented by independent unions or other workers' organizations. All Fair Trade producers are required to abide by International Labor Organization (ILO) standards upholding rights to free association, freedom from discrimination, prohibition of child or involuntary labor, and workplace safety. In addition, Fair Trade producers must adhere to environmental criteria designed to minimize the impact of farming on watersheds, topsoil, and overall environmental well-being (see Raynolds 2000; Murray and Raynolds 2000). Hence, Fair Trade farmers are not permitted to use any chemical herbicides and should maintain uncultivated buffer zones adjacent to streams and rivers. These criteria do not confer organic status on Fair Trade products, although in some instances (particularly among coffee producers) growers adopt the stricter requirements of organic certification so as to garner a higher price for their crops. Compliance with Fair Trade criteria is assessed by outside monitors during annual "social audits" conducted onsite among the producers' groups.

In contrast to the U.S., where a limited range of Fair Trade goods is available only through alternative retail outlets, food co-ops, and coffeehouses, Fair Trade items in recent years have moved into the European retail mainstream. Between 1998 and 2002, the volume of Fair Trade products sold worldwide increased 204%, reaching $307 million in sales in the latter year (FLO 2004). The United Kingdom and Switzerland are the world's leading consumers of such products, importing a total of 67.6 million pounds of Fair Trade agricultural goods in 2002 (Ibid.). According to the Head Produce Buyer for the UK's largest supermarket chain, Fair Trade products currently comprise about 15% of all imported bananas, tea, coffee, and cocoa entering Britain each year (Marcus Hoggarth, personal communication, March 13, 2003). Most British supermarket chains prominently feature Fair Trade items among their standard product lines, and the largest actively promote their commitment to Fair Trade as a measure of their broader social responsibility (see, for example, Tesco 2003; Sainsbury's 2003). In addition to its prominent place on supermarket shelves and company websites, Fair Trade has been the subject of several nationwide promotional campaigns in the mass media. In conjunction with FLO, retailers in the UK organized a "Fair Trade Fortnight" during early 2003, an advertising blitz in which British consumers were encouraged to learn more about the initiative and sample a range of Fair Trade products at their neighborhood supermarkets.

The hundreds of millions of dollars in annual sales of Fair Trade commodities represent a loss, albeit still a minor one, in potential earnings for Proctor and Gamble, Chiquita, Cadbury's, and other global middlemen. Borne of the same anger at deepening global disparities that have animated tumultuous anti-IMF and WTO protests, the Fair Trade movement turns not to the streets but to the private realm of consumer choice to express opposition to the leading actors and effects of globalization. Yet, such opposition remained largely symbolic until the movement's recent entry into the

supermarket trade, whereupon it became one niche market amidst a dizzying array of consumer options. In its reliance upon consumer preference in upscale suburban supermarkets, Fair Trade could be characterized as the quintessential postmodern social movement—one that is detached, private, and overwhelmingly consumer-driven. Indeed, from this point of view, political engagement with global inequities may be no more perilous than accessing the internet site of Tesco or Sainsbury's and using one's Visa card to purchase Fair Trade coffee and bananas. Private home delivery of one's purchases is available on both websites at an additional charge.

The adoption of Fair Trade products by mainstream supermarkets could be seen as concomitant with the regime of "flexible accumulation" (Harvey 1989) that has replaced Fordist mass consumption in the developed countries. As a response to the declining markets based on mass-produced standardized products and the diminishing real wages of most workers since the 1970s, flexible accumulation has entailed a proliferation of higher-priced product lines and specialized niche markets that cater to upwardly mobile consumers (Ibid.: 179). Hence, the explosion of "gourmet" and flavored coffees in the 1990s (often referred to as "yuppie" coffees) sought to reverse an underlying secular decline in per capita coffee consumption and attendant glut in world markets (Roseberry 1996). Not coincidentally, coffee was the first commodity to be widely marketed as a Fair Trade product, and remains the most readily available Fair Trade item in North America.

In its routinization within retail marketing, has Fair Trade become merely another choice within an overwhelming range of consumer options, all designed to bolster the supermarket bottom line? While it may be futile to speculate about the motives of retailers who actively promote Fair Trade, there seems little doubt that the initiative has experienced phenomenal growth because it appeals to a newfound sense of consumer agency. In an influential essay on the global cultural economy, Appadurai has written that a hallmark of postmodern marketing is the "fetishism of the consumer…[who] is consistently helped to believe that he or she is an actor, where in fact he or she is at best a chooser" (1990: 307). From this standpoint, Fair Trade derives much of its appeal from the belief, however illusory or exaggerated, that consumers not only exercise real choice in the market, but in doing so can transform the world.

Yet, against the claims of Appadurai and others whose work explored the "new structure of feeling" that has arisen since the 1970s, the very premises of the Fair Trade movement also herald a decisive break with the cool detachment of postmodernity. As Harvey (1989) noted, the production, transportation, and marketing innovations of recent decades have massively altered the nature of consumption in developed countries. The post-Fordist consumer is brought in contact with an unprecedented array of commodities whose points of origin differ radically in space and time, allowing a vicarious sampling of exotic cultures and geographies. Yet, daily experience through the life of commodities occurs "in such a way as to conceal almost perfectly any trace of origin, of the labor processes that produced them, or of the social relations implicated in their production" (Harvey 1989: 299-300). The result is seen to be a sort of alienation on a global scale, as the postmodern celebration of consumer choice drowns out the pleas of poor farmers and child workers whose labor made such choices possible in the first place. Appadurai concurs that the unprecedented spatial dispersion of production and consumption "generates alienation (in Marx's sense) twice intensified, for its social sense is now compounded by a complicated spatial dynamic which is increasingly global" (1990: 307). Other analyses, identifying postmodern sentiments and aesthetics as the "cultural logic" of late capitalism, have reached a similar conclusion from the endpoint of the commodity chain. The mass consumption of items grown and manufactured under repressive conditions requires, in Jameson's terms, a "mass effacement of the traces of production" (1991: 314). How else, he asked, could the individual enjoy the self-indulgent experiences upon which late capitalism depended if continually reminded of the injustices implicated in the very act of consumption? In retrospect, it can be seen that these early assessments of postmodernity failed to anticipate how the information and transportation technologies of recent times would soon dramatically disseminate, rather than conceal, knowledge of the origins of globally-traded commodities. The internet has emerged as arguably the most important tool employed by activists to spread information of global inequities as well as organize mass protests against them (both in the streets and in cyberspace). As the anti-globalization movement marshaled evidence of sweatshops, child and forced labor and environmental degradation before corporate shareholders and middle class suburbanites alike, it became obvious to millions in the developed North how consumption could be reconciled with conscience. The answer to this paradox, as is suggested by the quote from an English newspaper that began this essay, was the Fair Trade movement.

Globalization and Banana Farming in the Eastern Caribbean

Among the effects of globalization has been an accelerating flow of capital, labor and commodities across national borders, enhanced by neoliberal economic policies promoting deregulated markets. In the process, small-scale farmers whose livelihood has been tied to protected markets have been forced to adapt to the removal of tariffs and price supports (Gates 1993, Nash 1994). Such policies have brought them into price competition with industrial agriculture, which enjoys greater economies of scale as well as "hidden" subsidies from government policies in the developed North. Usually unable to compete on such terms in deregulated markets, household-based agriculturalists have steadily withdrawn from commercial farming, opting instead for emigration, seasonal reliance on wages, and, in many instances, the production of illicit drugs.

For countries whose economies are dominated by small-scale agriculture, the resulting social and economic dislocations have been staggering, especially when there are no readily available alternative crops or sources of wage employment. One of the most dramatic manifestations of such processes has been anti-globalization protests, both in the developed world and among displaced producers in the South (Edelman 1990, Collier and Quaratiello 1994). St. Lucia has been no exception to this process, for falling banana prices following the unification of the European market triggered an unprecedented period of growers' strikes and rural unrest in that country's Mabouya Valley (Reynolds 2003). Protests and angry confrontations with police in 1993 culminated in the shooting deaths of two banana farmers from that region. In addition to social unrest, the decline of the Windward Islands banana industry has generated a burgeoning underground economy in marijuana production and cocaine transshipment, much of it reportedly in the hands of former banana growers and farm workers. By the mid-1990s, St. Vincent was second only to Jamaica in reported marijuana production in the Caribbean (St. Lucian Business Focus 1995: 8), while St. Lucia had emerged as the leading Eastern Caribbean island in transshipments (Voice 2003a). In several instances during 2002 and 2003, shipments of bananas originating in St. Lucia had been used to transport cocaine to the UK (Voice 2002).

Together with St. Vincent, Dominica, and Grenada, St. Lucia is one of the four Windward Islands, all of which are small, newly independent countries in the Eastern Caribbean. Throughout the region, export agriculture has long been dominated by a "reconstituted peasantry" formed after the abolition of slavery (Mintz 1984), although this process occurred in different ways on the various islands. Like most of the Caribbean, St. Lucia was a sugar-producing island throughout its colonial period. Unlike other islands with a more continuous history of British occupation, however, the estate system was controlled from the outset by a French expatriate class.[1] Planters were economically weakened by the abolition of slavery under the French in 1791, and politically disempowered after the island's transfer to British administration in 1815. Faced with intense competition from more technologically modern sugar production elsewhere, cash-poor landlords divided their estates among former slaves. They, in turn, cultivated sugar under a sharecropping arrangement known as *metayage*. Although such arrangements continued in some places until the 1950s, by the early twentieth century the declining viability of sugar allowed sharecroppers (*metayers*) to negotiate more favorable contracts with landlords or to purchase land from them outright. Land acquisitions were also facilitated by colonial policies that offered Crown Lands to small-scale farmers in order to create a politically "stable" peasantry (Lobdell 1988). A few remaining estates continued to operate in the fertile Roseau and Mabouya valleys, but by the 1970s and 80s political pressure from landless workers led to their redistribution.

Following the collapse of the region's remaining sugar production by the mid-twentieth century, the economies of all four Windward Islands grew heavily reliant on the production of bananas for export. This dependence was facilitated by British policies granting Eastern Caribbean bananas a protected market in the UK following World War II. The British encouraged banana production as a much needed source of income for colonies that would otherwise constitute a drain on central government revenues. Additionally, Caribbean bananas were granted protected status to prevent monopoly control of the retail market by Fyffes PLC, then a wholly-owned subsidiary of the U.S. multinational Chiquita. Finally, banana production was consolidated after the attainment of internal self-government in the 1960s, as nationalist leaders such as John Compton of St. Lucia's United Workers Party won power by mobilizing the votes of rural residents. Largely to reward Compton's rural constituencies, banana farmers became the primary beneficiaries of government agricultural policy and development aid until the 1990s.

In contrast to Central America, where single banana plantations may comprise thousands of acres and employ hundreds of workers, almost all Windward Island banana farms are labor-intensive, family-run operations. On St. Lucia, the average size of a banana farm is under four acres, and the average number of full-time wage workers employed per farm is less than two persons. Seventy-five percent of all banana farms are less than ten acres in area (OAS 1995). The small size and family-based ownership of Windward Islands banana farms make them unique among the world's export-oriented banana industries. Yet, the highly labor intensive nature of small-scale production, the lack of cableways and irrigation, and the steep hillside slopes of most St. Lucian farms greatly limit farm productivity as compared to Central and South American plantations. While the latter often attain 30 tons or more of fruit per acre each year, St. Lucian farms average only about one third that amount. In addition, the cost of farm labor in the Eastern Caribbean (about US $15 per day) exceeds prevailing wages in Central and South America where, even with union representation, banana workers rarely earn more than five dollars per day. The limited productivity of Eastern Caribbean farms and their high labor costs pose immense difficulties to their ability to compete with Latin American banana farms on the basis of price alone.

At the time of the St. Lucian banana industry's historic peak of production (1991), approximately 8,200 island residents operated banana farms (OAS 1995). According to a director of the St. Lucia Banana Corporation, in the early 1990s the banana industry generated more than 60% of the country's export earnings and directly employed 35-40,000 persons out of a population of 140,000 (Tony Jean Pierre, personal communication, May 11, 2000). Prior to the emergence of the Single European Market in 1993, fruit from St. Lucia alone comprised approximately 25% of the total U.K. market share for bananas, with another 40% sourced from the other Windward Islands (see Nurse and Sandiford 1995: 28). Until 1993, St. Lucian and other Windward Islands farmers exported their fruit under the terms of the Lomé Convention, a succession of treaties that established market preferences

for Caribbean bananas in Europe. Under its terms, bananas from 46 states that were former European colonies in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific (so-called ACP countries) were awarded tariff-free quotas in European markets. The treaties also limited the amount of Latin American (so-called "Dollar Area") bananas that could be imported, and imposed duties of $75 per ton on all such fruit sold in Europe. With the emergence of the Single European Market in 1993, Lomé was reformulated to provide importers with transferable licenses for the importation of duty-free fruit. To the extent that ACP countries could not fulfill their quotas, licenses for the balance could be sold to other exporters, including the U.S.-based multinationals Chiquita, Dole, and Del Monte. The effect of this was a sharp increase in the volume of dollar area fruit sold in the UK, with an attendant drop in retail prices. These trends, in turn, forced producer prices in the Windwards to unprecedented lows.

Despite the increased access to EU markets afforded by the Lomé III revisions, the United States and several Latin American governments, acting at the request of Chiquita, challenged the quota and licensing system as an unfair trade practice before the World Trade Organization.[2] In 1998, the WTO ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, signaling an eventual end to more than a half century of protected markets for Windward Islands banana producers. Parties to the WTO motion agreed to defer introduction of a WTO-compliant tariff-only arrangement to 2006, providing a transition period for Caribbean producers to improve their productivity. Yet, the introduction of large volumes of dollar area bananas in the wake of the Single European Market has already driven grower prices for many categories of fruit in the Eastern Caribbean below production costs. When the UK-based Asda Supermarket chain was acquired by Walmart in 2002, that retailer negotiated a contract with Del Monte for low-cost Ecuadorian bananas, triggering a price war throughout Britain that drove down retail prices for loose bananas 30% in three months. After this first round of market liberalization and because of future uncertainty, there has been marked attrition from the Caribbean banana industry. A recent survey by the St. Lucian government revealed just 1,400 banana farmers remaining in production, a decline of 84% in ten years (Hillary La Force, personal communication, August 13, 2003). Due to the exodus of growers from the industry, total banana production has declined nearly every year over the last decade, from nearly 123,000 tons in 1993 to 48,000 tons in 2002 (WIBDECO 2003).

The government's response to these trends and to a post-Lomé future has been to promote technological change among the remaining farmers to enhance their competitiveness within a liberalized market. In 2002, it established the Banana Emergency Recovery Unit within the Ministry of Agriculture, an agency intended to stanch attrition from the industry by coordinating extension services and disseminating innovations to farmers. Among the latter are drip-line irrigation in five agro-ecological zones throughout the country and the attendant promotion of meristem tissue culture bananas, a high-yielding variety (HYV) imported from a plant-breeding firm in Israel. Like many HYV crops, tissue culture bananas offer the possibility of improved productivity but require a technical "package" including mechanical land preparation, irrigation, and the administration of inputs at precise intervals. For farmers that qualify for BERU assistance, land preparation and tissue culture plants are subsidized, and irrigation costs are not recovered from farmers until after the plants begin bearing. BERU employs 13 extension officers and assistants to advise farmers and to monitor their compliance with the technical package. BERU's director acknowledges that at least 30% of the country's farms lie outside the zones scheduled for irrigation, although government critics charge that the actual distribution of irrigation and HYVs is likely to be far narrower than BERU suggests. The prospect of growing inequity in banana-producing communities has been seized upon by the political opposition, whose leader has claimed that "the incentives being provided to a limited number of farmers are…directed at creating a small elite group of farmers, rather than servicing the many. This marks a return to the old model of the now deceased St. Lucian sugar industry and the big estates, where many labored but few benefited" (Voice 2003: 2).

Fair Trade in the Eastern Caribbean

If the government's goal is to improve the competitiveness of St. Lucian farmers on a deregulated market, the largest NGO in the region seeks to redefine much of that market in terms of Fair Trade principles. The Windward Islands Farmers Association (WINFA), a regional organization based in St. Vincent, first sought alternative markets for Windward Islands bananas soon after the emergence of the Single European Market in 1993. In 1999, WINFA began working with FLO to establish Fair Trade producers' groups on each of the islands. By July, 2000, the first Fair Trade fruit was being labeled as such and purchased by the region's banana exporter, WIBDECO (Windward Islands Banana Development and Export Company) for distribution to British supermarkets.

In Britain, Fair Trade fruit occupies an upper price tier in a stratified retail market quite unlike that of U.S. supermarkets, where all fruit is sold in loose clusters. While loose fruit makes up the majority of banana sales in the UK, supermarkets also feature a variety of pre-packaged bananas sold in cello-bagged clusters. These include organic fruit, "kids' sized" (small) bananas, and Fair Trade fruit. Retail prices for loose fruit from both Latin America and the Windwards dropped to an unprecedented low of 79p per kg. (about US.59 per lb.) in 2003, but prepackaged fruit is priced at considerably higher levels. In early 2003, the largest retailer of Fair Trade fruit, Sainsbury's, sold its Blue Parrot Café (children's sized) bananas from the Windwards at the equivalent of US .91 per lb., organic bananas from the Dominican Republic and Grenada at $1.14 per lb., and Fair Trade fruit (from the Windwards and the Dominican Republic) at $1.29 per lb. In

2003, Sainsbury's introduced specially-labeled clear plastic packaging for its Fair Trade bananas from the Dominican Republic and the Eastern Caribbean. The front of the package displays FLO's Fair Trade logo, while the back describes some of the problems of poverty experienced by rural Caribbean communities and how the development projects funded by Fair Trade's social premium have addressed these problems. The intent of such narratives, according to the chain's Produce Buyer, is to "put a face on the Caribbean farmer" and create a personalistic tie between shoppers in the UK and those who produce their bananas. Given their distinct labeling and separate promotion, Fair Trade bananas do not compete directly with loose fruit, although their much higher price obviously restricts market demand. Sainsbury's Head Produce Buyer estimates that 25% of all bananas sold by the chain are Fair Trade fruit from the Windwards (Marcus Hoggarth personal communication, March 13, 2003). Despite continuing price pressure at the lower end of the market, he predicts that Fair Trade fruit will eventually command about 35% of the supermarket's total banana sales.

Four British supermarkets are responsible for the retailing of approximately 75% of all Fair Trade fruit produced in the Windward Islands (Ibid.). Each has its own specifications with regard to labeling and packaging, and requests a specific volume of Fair Trade supermarket-branded fruit during each quarter of the year. These requirements are transmitted to WIBDECO, and then to WINFA. Because the demand for Fair Trade fruit in the UK falls considerably short of potential supply, WINFA establishes quarterly production quotas for each of the islands. From these quotas, the National Fair Trade Association on each island issues weekly allocations to be filled by local Fair Trade producers' groups. Between early 2001 and 2003, shipments of Fair Trade fruit for all four Windward Islands averaged about 140,000 boxes per quarter (about 13% of total banana production), although allocations increased when the Tesco supermarket chain began aggressively marketing Fair Trade fruit in early 2003.

As such allocations have increased, the numbers of groups and farmers certified for Fair Trade production have grown as well. The first Fair Trade shipments in 2000 were filled by 12 farmers' groups containing 466 members, but by mid-2003 32 groups had been registered with a membership of 1,368 farmers (WINFA 2003). Yet the growth and distribution of Fair Trade production has not occurred evenly throughout the islands, in part because of supermarket preferences. When the Tesco chain began marketing Fair Trade fruit, it insisted that all its bananas be sourced from Dominica, a decision that overrode WINFA's role in allocating island quotas. Some in the region attribute Tesco's insistence on Dominican fruit to the supermarket's self-interested promotional strategies rather than principles of social equity. Often identified as the "Nature Island" because of its rugged volcanic topography and relative lack of tourist development, Dominica has received considerable recognition from international environmental organizations for its conservation policies. By sourcing all its fruit from Dominica, several industry officials claimed, Tesco was seeking to enhance both its reputation for social and environmental responsibility. Paradoxically, Tesco's decision disregarded the policy-making role of WINFA, which claims to represent the interests of Fair Trade producers. The result of Tesco's sourcing strategy has been a rapid expansion of Fair Trade producers' groups on Dominica (with 13 awaiting certification as of August, 2003), but a much slower growth of such groups elsewhere. In addition to the 16 groups on Dominica in August, 2003, nine Fair Trade groups operated on St. Vincent, six on St. Lucia, and just one on Grenada. Despite the fact that St. Lucia produces approximately one half of all the Windwards' bananas, its share of Fair Trade production is less than 25% of the total.

All members of Fair Trade producers' groups must conform to FLO's criteria for membership and labeling, but because of limited production quotas, less than half of the fruit produced on Fair Trade farms will actually be labeled and sold as such. Most groups have a roster in which members pack labeled Fair Trade fruit in one out of every four shipments. Because clusters are dehanded (bunches taken from the main stalk), washed, weighed, cello-packed, and boxed in the field, and because each supermarket has its own specifications in terms of cluster size, labeling, box dimensions and weight, farmers are confronted with an array of up to four different "pack types" of fruit per harvest.[3] Each of these, in turn, commands a different producer price. The challenging demands of supermarket-specific packaging that confront farmers during each harvest are but a small indication of the bewildering array of pack types produced on a given island during each shipment. In August, 2003, for example, the largest of St. Lucia's banana-buying companies, the St. Lucia Banana Corporation, handled 14 different pack types for UK supermarkets. Although each was associated with a differing producer price, it is instructive to note that the considerable differences in retail prices between generic and Fair Trade fruit does not correspond to the price differential received by growers. While Fair Trade fruit retails in the UK for a price 119% greater than that of generic fruit, Fair Trade growers receive a price at most seven cents per pound (41%) higher than producers of the lowest cost generic fruit. This does not include the $1.75 social premium paid by supermarkets for each box of Fair Trade fruit. Given that each box will retail for the equivalent of $53, however, it can be seen that the social premium is a relatively negligible share of the total value of each box. Clearly, then, much of the retail price differential between regular and Fair Trade fruit is not returned to the Fair Trade growers or the communities to which they belong.

The gap between producer and retail prices is one dimension of a marketing relationship that Fair Trade growers describe as less than equitable. Among the most controversial aspects of this relationship are the environmental criteria that FLO has imposed on Fair Trade banana producers. To protect watersheds and aquatic life, FLO requires Fair Trade growers to refrain from all herbicide use on their farms. This has greatly increased labor inputs for Fair Trade growers, as

mechanical weed clearing is adopted in place of the chemical herbicide Paraquat widely employed on conventional farms. Fair Trade farmers' groups have purchased gas-powered weedeaters for this task, with the machines available to members on a rotating basis. The use of weedeaters in place of herbicides has been greeted with little enthusiasm among growers. Most older farmers (in a farming population whose average age is nearly 50) lack the skill or strength to use the machines effectively, at least for a period long enough to clear several acres of farmland. Consequently older farmers now hire younger men to weed their farms, a task that they had formerly completed themselves with the use of chemicals. Most Fair Trade farmers interviewed in St. Lucia's Mabouya Valley group reported that their labor inputs and wage expenses increased as a result of the no-herbicide policy. To their even greater dismay, farmers learned that one common weed easily eradicated by chemical means (*Commelina* sp. or watergrass) was actually propagated when its stems were cut by weedeaters, as the broken stems send out new roots. Because watergrass is a host species for nematodes, and Fair Trade restrictions prohibit the use of nematicides, many farmers argue that FLO's policies have amplified pest problems and provided no effective alternatives to chemical use.

At meetings of the Mabouya Valley Fair Trade group, St. Lucia's largest, the herbicide ban was still hotly debated two years after the group's inception. At its August, 2003, meeting, the group's President defended the policy before a skeptical membership: "We are not like those big companies that are poisoning the environment with their chemicals. We are getting a social premium because we are Fair Trade farmers; the minute we stop taking care of the environment we are no longer Fair Trade farmers and we will no longer receive the social premium." One member retorted, "But our grandmothers and grandfathers grew bananas and they cared about the environment. Who are these people from outside to tell us they know better than we how to take care of the environment and grow bananas?" The President responded that their grandparents did in fact contribute to soil erosion by planting on steep slopes and river banks. He further stressed the adverse effects of chemical use on farmers' health, an issue rarely acknowledged by those who regularly use herbicides (see Andreatta 1998). Such arguments notwithstanding, it was the member who challenged Fair Trade policy rather than the President whose comments were loudly seconded by the membership at large. Many had vigorously applauded when he categorized FLO and its certifying agents with a host of other powerful "outsiders," all of whom are believed to make unreasonable demands on farmers. Among these are the supermarket chains that dictate an ever-changing array of product specifications and ever-declining product prices, the island-based banana "buyers" (fruit inspectors employed by WIBDECO) who are often accused of rejecting fruit for arbitrary reasons, government extension agents whose recommendations are vital for loan guarantees, and, most recently, compliance inspectors for EUREP/GAP. [4] Despite the rhetoric of equity and mutuality adopted by the Fair Trade movement in the developed North, those who confer Fair Trade status on farmers are seen in no different light than the powerful agents who have personified world market expectations in the past. The Windwards-based Certification Officer charged with ensuring Fair Trade farmer compliance openly acknowledges that some of FLO's environmental criteria are inappropriate for local conditions. In order to minimize soil erosion and protect watersheds, FLO requires that Fair Trade farmers maintain a 20 meter buffer zone on farms adjacent to streams and main roads. While such requirements may be feasible in Europe, the Certification Officer observes, on a several acre Caribbean farm, a 20 meter buffer represents a large amount of land removed from production and makes "an unreasonable economic demand on farmers." WINFA requested, and obtained, a modification of this policy for the buffer zone to consist of tree crops that may be of commercial value, such as mangoes, citrus and coconuts. Because tree crops require at least five years to reach bearing maturity, however, the modified buffer zone requirement still poses a considerable economic sacrifice for affected farmers.

In practice, it is difficult to determine how many Fair Trade farmers are in full compliance with FLO's environmental requirements. Because each box of Windwards fruit bears a unique grower identification number, it (and any measurable pesticide residues) can be traced back to the farm that produced it. A small number of farmers have been delisted as Fair Trade growers as a result of the monitoring activities of their peers and the Certification Officer, usually because of herbicide use. More commonly, Fair Trade farmers negotiate the herbicide issue in a way that minimally complies with FLO's environmental criteria while also minimizing the increased labor costs and pest problems that those criteria have created. Given that only a small proportion of each farm's output will be sold as Fair Trade bananas, many have divided their farms between areas cultivated under conventional practices and areas of low chemical use in which weedeaters and machetes are employed. Ostensibly, all fruit labeled as Fair Trade bananas come from the latter part of the farm. The President of the Mabouya Valley group acknowledges that many members already engage in these practices, and worries that the division of farms between Fair Trade and non-Fair Trade compliant areas creates the potential for misrepresentation: "What if you have two acres grown conventionally and one acre that uses no herbicide? Maybe your Fair Trade quota is 40 boxes but you only have 20 boxes available from the Fair Trade part of your farm. You see how tempting it would be to divert fruit from the other part of your farm and label it as Fair Trade?" Should pesticide residues be detected on Fair Trade fruit in Britain, he continued, the reputation of Fair Trade growers—and the market that sustains them—may be damaged beyond repair.

If FLO's environmental criteria represent an abrupt change in local agricultural practices, its social criteria have promoted a form of cooperative development that is in most places also without precedent. Growers may only sell Fair Trade fruit if they belong to a producer's

group that is democratically-organized, self-governing and non-discriminatory with regard to gender, age, religious or political identity. In most Eastern Caribbean farming communities, formal cooperatives either did not exist or were largely nonfunctioning prior to the advent of Fair Trade, so their subsequent proliferation can be attributed entirely to incentives provided by the movement. Three of the six groups registered on St. Lucia did, however, develop from pre-existing agricultural cooperatives or integrated development projects. It is probably no coincidence that these organizations have had the highest membership participation levels noted among St. Lucian Fair Trade farmer groups. Fair Trade farmers' groups are required to meet no less than once per month, and participation is assured by an attendance policy that results in deregistration of members after three consecutive absences. Administratively, the meetings serve as opportunities for officers to disseminate technical information and Fair Trade marketing news to members, for members to share information among themselves, and for requests to be directed to umbrella organizations such as the National Fair Trade Committee on each island and WINFA. Each Fair Trade farmers' group elects a delegate to the National Fair Trade Committee, which in turn meets monthly.

Perhaps the most important contribution that Fair Trade groups make to their local communities is the allocation of social premiums for development projects of their devising. A good deal of each meeting is devoted to the discussion and debate of potential projects to be funded with social premiums and to the evaluation of existing projects. Any member of a group may propose a project, and proposed uses of social premiums are voted on by the membership at large. Among the first projects adopted by Fair Trade groups was the purchase of weedeaters to replace herbicides on members' farms. Since then, however, social premiums have been used in a wide array of projects to benefit the communities at large, such as equipment and buildings for local schools, improvement of roads, and vocational training programs for village youth. On St. Lucia, a novel health insurance fund has been established with social premiums, providing reimbursement of Fair Trade farmers and their families for medical expenses up to EC $1,000 (US $375). Given the high costs of secondary school attendance for youth in rural areas (who must commute to town to attend classes), the use of social premiums to underwrite a scholarship fund for farmers' families has also enhanced educational opportunities. The magnitude of such contributions to community development is considerable, as evidenced by the fact that nearly US $1.3 million in social premiums were returned to the Windward Islands from Fair Trade banana sales between July, 2000, and April, 2003 (WINFA 2003). Of this amount, nearly US $750,000 was made directly available to Fair Trade producers' groups to invest in development projects of their own design.[5] The balance of the premiums (US $550,000) was used to defray administrative costs of WINFA and the National Fair Trade Committees of each island, and to underwrite projects that benefit all Fair Trade groups generally.

Assessment and Conclusions

There is general agreement, both among Fair Trade and conventional growers, that the Fair Trade movement has materially benefited farmers in the Windward Islands. These benefits accrue primarily from the social premiums generated by Fair Trade bananas, which have funded an array of community services otherwise beyond the reach of most rural residents. Although Fair Trade fruit does obtain a higher producer price than other prepackaged bananas,[6] many farmers claim that they do not realize a net gain from these prices. This is primarily due to an increase in labor costs as mechanical methods of weed clearing have replaced chemical herbicides. Several farmers also volunteered that the greater weed and pest problems associated with weedeater use have led to discernible losses in yields. Notwithstanding the often animated complaints about FLO's environmental criteria, only a handful of farmers have dropped out of the Mabouya valley group since its formation in 2000. Like all other Fair Trade farming groups in the Windwards, it maintains a waiting list of local farmers wishing to join in the event of resignations or increased quotas, which would enable the group to expand beyond its current membership of 119. For most on the list, their wait is likely to be long, if not futile. In 2001, the group admitted 50 "provisional" members in anticipation of an increase in Fair Trade quotas. The quota increase, when it came, was significantly short of expectations, and the provisional members were delisted as Fair Trade growers.

Other benefits associated with Fair Trade are less material, but no less tangible. For most farmers, participation in a Fair Trade group is the first opportunity they have had to be part of a democratically-run community organization not affiliated with party politics.[7] Levels of participation in the groups vary, but in the Mabouya Valley a sizeable majority of the membership attends each meeting, and most of those in attendance are highly engaged in debates over the use of social premiums. Such meetings provide farmers with a novel opportunity to plan local development, rather than passively accept whatever largesse and priorities that the state and NGOs intend for them. From this process has emerged both a discernible identity and sense of community that has extended beyond the allocation of the material benefits of Fair Trade. Fair Trade farmers are often recognizable by their proudly-worn lapel pins bearing the same logo that FLO displays on all the products it certifies. One SLBC official, quoting a member of the Grace Fair Trade group, summarized the new outlook: "she said that…since we became part of the Fair Trade Group, when a family member dies…the group comes and supports, provides monetary support through a collection. But she said to me, when we sold before to this company, you never encouraged us to do that. And I told her, well…this is the good thing about Fair Trade, that it builds up community."

Notwithstanding their democratic organization, Fair Trade farmers' groups remain embedded in a world market over which they have little control. Far from altering that fact,

the marketing of Windwards bananas as Fair Trade fruit has heightened the vagaries to which its producers are exposed. As other observers have pointed out (Slocum 1996; Grossman 1998), despite their nominal independence as landowners, Windwards farmers have experienced a profound erosion in their autonomy in recent decades. Fruit specifications and production techniques have become increasingly routinized as responsibility for its packaging shifted over the last three decades from retailer to importer, then to local BGAs (Banana Growers Associations), and finally to the grower. In this process, a host of extension and certifying agents was deployed to instruct growers in an increasingly uniform production process and to discipline those who defied the new routines. The recent shift in the retail banana trade in the UK from standardization to segmented niche marketing has not reversed this trend. Rather, through the proliferation of pack types, market segmentation has greatly compounded the complexity of the production and packaging routines to which farmers are subjected. As part of this trend, Fair Trade retailing could hardly be expected to enhance local decision-making or control over the production process. Indeed, in its imposition of low-chemical use criteria, Fair Trade subordinates priorities of growers to the desires of consumers and certifying agencies in the developed countries. While it has ameliorated to some degree the economic desperation of Windwards farmers, Fair Trade has not altered their dependent position in the world market. It is little surprise, then, that the movement's rhetoric of reciprocity rarely finds expression among Fair Trade growers themselves. The statement of a WINFA official best sums up the feelings of many Windwards residents about the Fair Trade movement: "Fair Trade has done a lot of good things for farmers and their communities, and we're grateful to still sell our bananas. But there have been so many changes in this industry in the last ten years that many of us wonder whether *this* will last. A lot of farmers now know that Fair Trade doesn't give him any more control over what he produces, how he produces it, or how he packages it. It's a new kind of dependence."

Hence, the role of Fair Trade in anti-globalization politics remains an ambivalent one. Even its deepest skeptics among banana farmers and WINFA officials welcome the benefits it has secured for the minority of farmers who qualify for Fair Trade status. Nor is it any exaggeration to say, as many do in the Windwards, that Fair Trade represents the last, best hope for family farmers otherwise unable to survive in a liberalized banana market. Should that prove to be the case, Fair Trade will have accomplished no small feat in a global economy characterized by a consolidation of power and wealth in ever-fewer hands. Yet the limits of the movement as a manifestation of anti-globalization politics also become apparent in the Eastern Caribbean. Far from eliminating the "middleman," Fair Trade has added an additional layer of criteria that must be fulfilled to the satisfaction of non-local certifying agencies. Further, Fair Trade farmers receive but a small portion of the retail price differential between generic and Fair Trade fruit. Among consumers in the developed North who believe that their purchases will fundamentally reform the global commodity system in which Fair Trade farmers participate, such hopes may prove as elusive as the condition of postmodernity itself.

Notes

[1]The island changed hands between the French and British fourteen times in the eighteenth century, and was finally ceded to Britain following the defeat of Napoleon. Culturally, the period of contested colonial occupation is still reflected in the widespread use of a French-based Creole (known as Patois or Kweole) and a civil code and land tenure laws based on French precedents.

[2]See Raynolds (2003) for background to the trade dispute centering on European banana imports. Nurse and Sandiford (1995) provide a comprehensive discussion of marketing arrangements predating the WTO suit.

[3]Grossman (1998) describes the emergence of the in-field "wet pack" system as a means by which the banana company (then Geest PLC) reduced labor costs by shifting the dehanding and boxing of bananas from its employees to farmers themselves. The present routine is an outgrowth of the wet pack system, but is rendered much more complex by the variety of supermarket-specific packing methods.

[4]The European Retailers Working Group, known as EUREP, represents the main supermarkets to which Windwards farmers export their bananas and other produce. They have developed common standards and procedures for Good Agricultural Practices, or GAP. Ostensibly developed to ensure food safety, EUREP-GAP entails nearly 40 pages of phyto-sanitary and worker-related criteria with which Windwards farmers are expected to comply by December 31, 2003. Among the most costly of these are requirements that farmers have flush toilets and potable running water in their farms for use by workers.

[5]The use of social premiums for local development projects is monitored by the National Fair Trade Committees on each of the islands. To access their project funds, Fair Trade producers' groups must submit a proposal to the National Committee specifying the nature of the planned project, its intended beneficiaries, costs, and work plan. These are routinely approved as long as the beneficiaries are the community as a whole or the producers' group in general. Projects that benefit specific individuals rather than the group or community as whole are declined by the National Committees.

[6]On average, Fair Trade pack types received a producer price 12% higher than other prepackaged bananas, according to prices paid by the St. Lucia Banana Corporation in August, 2003.

[7]In the first decades of the St. Lucia banana industry, growers were required to belong to the Banana Growers' Association, an island-wide organization that negotiated contracts with exporters and managed industry and government relations. BGA policies were decided on a one-person, one-vote basis until 1967, when the government turned the organization into a statutory board under joint government-grower control (Romalis 1975). Since then, small growers have had few opportunities or avenues to directly influence policies governing the industry.

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