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Title of the paper prepared and presented for the XXVIII Latin American Studies Association (LASA) International Congress in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (June 11-14, 2009) is titled “Fair Trade Coffee in Costa Rica: Fighting for the Equitable Revenue Distribution in the Global Commodity Chain”.

Abstract

The examination of the system of coffee production that operates within the context of globalization reveals the social, political, economic, and environmental pressures that small farmers continuously face, whether prices are high or low. All agricultural producers, of coffee or any other crop, face similar challenges when global competition is fierce and small farmers lack the basic inputs needed to remain competitive (credit, stable markets, and appropriate technology). Such challenges are not entirely new, however. Small farmers have historically been located in a position of disadvantage within the world economy and coffee farmers are no exception: the structure of the global coffee market is based on a system of unequal power relations.

In this paper I address two main related topics: the global commodity chain (GCC) and fair trade (FT). In the first section of the paper I discuss the main characteristics of the boom-and-burst condition that make coffee such a volatile commodity in the global market, the general characteristics of the GCC –with special attention to the Costa Rican coffee production,- and the direct implications that low coffee prices have on commodity producers in Costa Rica. In the second section of the paper, I examine FT as an alternative to the GCC. In Costa Rica, coffee farmers are “fighting back” against the vicissitude of global markets by engaging in the creation of alternative forms of production and trade. This emerging mechanism challenges conventional views regarding how coffee is produced and exchanged. FT claims to provide greater benefits to small producers, reducing the uncertainties of the market, and providing them with higher prices and other potential benefits.

Summary of the experience

The LASA Congress is perhaps the most important conference held every year for Latin Americanists who come from all academic disciplines. The purpose of attending this conference was to present some of the findings of my PhD dissertation, attend other lectures, talks, workshops, and seminars, and meet other Latin Americanists with whom I might share similar academic interests.

This trip exceeded my expectations in the sense that I not only met my goals but also learned first hand, “up close and personal” the social, economic, and political realities of Rio de Janeiro, one of Brazil’s mega-cities. I presented my paper on the first day of the conference and heard the talks of others who are also interested in fair trade. I met most of these presenters and we discussed our research interests and our country-specific findings. I attended other sessions that focused on issues related to political economy such as development alternatives.

The academic growth I have obtained from attending this conference centers on the incredible amount of information that I have been able to learn about without actually

reading it in a book or in a journal! Learning related topics and issues to my interests first hand and taught by the actual writers and researchers of the projects make the whole activity of learning so much more inviting and interesting! Keeping up with issues of Latin America is a challenge mainly due to the great diversity of Latin America and the multiple layers of issues that affect each one country in particular. This is a comprehensive form of obtaining information regarding the latest trends in academic research and I am truly glad I was a part of it.

As for the application of the knowledge learned in my future classes, no doubt that the attendance of the conference will be included in my classes, especially in the “Politics of Latin America” course. Brazil sometimes tends to be excluded from being a member of Latin America since Portuguese is the official language spoken and not Spanish. But Brazil offers an interesting case in the study of Latin America. Pictures were taken purposively to be shown in class so students can have an alternative, perhaps more personal, view of Brazil, especially when discussing abstract or “dry” concepts.

In sum, the experience was very useful, both for personal reasons (it always is a pleasure to discuss academic issues with other academics who “speak” your same language) and for professional reasons. The experiences and knowledge acquired in this trip add up to my knowledge of Latin America, making my understanding of the many current complexities of Latin America a bit more clear and informative.