

## Essay Questions Anthropology 203 Food Across Cultures 2012

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“Globalisation and its counterpart, localisation, have had an enormous impact on patterns of food production and consumption. Watson and Caldwell state that “food practices are implicated in a complex field of relationships, expectations, and choices that are contested, negotiated, and often unequal” (2005:1). Choose a particular global food to illustrate their point.

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### Coffee’s love affair: Coffee’s global complex web of relationships

This essay explores the statement by Watson and Caldwell that, ‘food practices are implicated in a complex field of relationships, expectations, and choices that are contested, negotiated, and often unequal’ through an examination of coffee’ (Watson and Caldwell, 2005 p. 1). Coffee illustrate’s Watson and Caldwell’s statement by examining the movement of goods through the coffee commodity chain. Talbot describes the commodity chain as ‘a network of labor and production processes whose result is a finished commodity’ (Talbot, 1997 p. 57). Coffee production is world wide, involving many small farmers selling their coffee to large transnational companies. These transnational companies then roast and sell the coffee to consumers all over the world. This complex web of relationships is fuelled by the expectations and choices of consumers and negotiated through transnational companies whom demand cheap produce often below the cost of production. These farmers bare the brunt of consumers desire for cheap coffee, contesting with each other and large corporations, unable to negotiated in equal environment. To combat this exploitation of farmers a new from of the commodity chain formed, Fair Trade. Fair trade organisations aim to change the outcome for farmers by creating a fairer system that supports everybody in the commodity chain. They do this by simplifying the system so people involved can discover their place within structure, thereby, negotiating a better relationship in an increased equal system. Nonetheless free trade is also adding to the complexly in this web of relationships.

Coffee is a global food. It is produced in tropical regions all over the world, and is one of the few international grown foods produced by small peasant farmers. About 70 per cent of the worldwide coffee harvest is produced by famers with less then ten acres of land (Brown et al., 2001). These farmers are geared

towards supplying cheap, often below cost coffee to thirsty world markets. This unequal relationship between the cost of coffee production and the profits of consumption involve 'a complex field of relationships' (Watson and Caldwell, 2005 p. 1). Our morning coffee is not just a caffeine fix its the backbone of a global system, of cheap labor, and economic stability in many Latin American, Asian and African countries. Different agents in this political economy face different challenges in this highly globalized and regulated system. Especially in an environment where the production cost is more then the selling cost. Tony, owner of Warm Winds Coffee, operates his coffee producing farm in Honduras and personally sells he's product in the cargo bay at JFK Airport in the U.S. Tony is what Michael Kearney calls polybians, people who operate in multiple global class structures (Kearney, 1996 pp. 141-143, Reichman, 2008 pp. 104-108). Tony is a new breed of an international class who are trying to combat the inequalities faced by farmers by directly selling their goods to customers. They face, and regularly go against, the established relationships within the system, and therefor are exposed to the inequalities more then any other agent.

Tony exemplifies Watson and Caldwell's statement. In the States, Tony is a struggling entrepreneur battling himself against companies like Starbucks, limited to selling his coffee in the cargo bay because only national brands are allowed in the terminal area. While he dreams to expand his business in direct sales he is constrained by international corporations who dictate the terms of the worlds coffee trade. In Honduras, Tony is considered an evil multimillionaire foreigner who is responsible for the suffering experienced by local farmers. Tony operates in the global system that limited by corporations and governments who are able to negotiate for themselves better deals. While in the local system of Honduras he's production operation is contested by the locals, who feel Tony is being unfair by taking away jobs. These local farmers are suffering from a world wide drop in coffee prices from one dollar per pound in the late nineties, to less then sixty cents in the first decade of the millennium. Tony's business is doing only slightly better then the average, yet local rumors have him as the symbol of an exploitative New York executive (Reichman, 2008 pp. 107-109). According to the local social structure Tony is out of place. He is becoming a metaphor for the relationships between the poor Honduras farmers and the wealthy American capitalists. While local farmers direct their anger towards Tony and the global system, Tony directs his anger at the major coffee companies.

Tony is but a tiny clog in a very large machine of complex relationships. The institutional structure of the global coffee industry is nowadays filled with consumer choice expectations. Companies such as Starbucks who claim to have close relationships with their suppliers, still have to balance that relationship with keeping their stockholders happy. To balance on this type-rope Starbucks has focused on fixing its supply chain governance. Through Starbucks' CAFE Practices Program, began in 2001, Starbucks hopes to bring some justice to an unequal system. The program hopes to transform relations with coffee produces and traders within the whole coffee market. It was introduced by pressure from fair trade activists in the 1990s who demanded that the coffee supply chain should be more morally and ethically responsible. Since then the program has become the beating drum of the company ethic business modal, effectively increasing their corporate responsibility. Despite such initiatives in the commodity chain the program still falls below those of Fair Trade. With Starbucks coffee producers generally receiving less than their fair trade counterparts (Macdonald, 2007 pp. 801-803). Such oversight by Starbucks's negotiators is diminishing the expectations of the program, by limiting the role on effects and the harnessing of resources for rural development. To further exacerbate the situation the Starbucks marketing department shouts a mantra of sustainability, greenwashing all their products and adding to the global complexity of coffee production.

Although Tony and others are stuck in the political and economic coffee machine, which they have little power over, others are flocking and benefiting from the Starbucks world. Such people have become the voice of a new lingua franca sometime called Starbuckian. For example small, medium, and large are called Tall, Grande, and Venti in Starbuckian. What makes the Starbucks global community attractive to these people is the production and consumption of just not a normal coffee but of a global image. Working at or drinking at Starbucks is a status symbol connecting the world's youth to one another more than ever; Starbucks is a melting pot of a global culture which is different from past Americanized symbols as it encompasses and connects a local community. These young people embody a generation of cultural explorers, whereby understanding Starbuckian they are able to connect, and possibly get jobs, the world over. Bridging the global and local cultural activities gap. Take Takeshi Natsuno's observation, 'Cultural differences are smaller than the generation difference...young people in Japan enjoy the same things as those in France,' as Kim Fellner notes, for some, this new language symbolizes the domination of corporate power, a relic of

imperialism (Fellner, 2008 pp. 166-169). This illustrates that the new language that these people share is creating a shared cultural based on the production and consumption of coffee, adding to the complex global web of the coffee commodity chain.

The unequal relationship between the cost of coffee production and the profits of consumption is leading the moral drive to negotiate a fairer deal for coffee producers. Fair Traded coffee is about creating better consumption, production and relationships practise to create better choices for farmers. The commodity chain of coffee is enormous involving farmers, intermediaries, importers, exporters, and roasters before it even reaches the consumer. Such a large chain, and the markets desire to make commodities cheaper, have created a complex system where those at the bottom cannot negotiate a fair deal. Fair trade coffee simplifies the commodity chain allowing farmers to understand where they sit in the food practices of coffee. Robert Foster argues that the simplified socio-spatial dimension of Fair Traded coffee allows farmers to track products across time and space. He suggests that this simplification has arisen as a result to the complexity of globalisation (Foster, 2006 p. 285). Coffee is the symbol through which, people such as Tony, reflect on their position in the global system.

There are five transnationals with control of approximately sixty per cent of the international coffee market. They are Nestle Foods, Procter and Gamble, Kraft, Coca Cola, and Sara Lee (Reichman, 2008 p. 112). It is these companies that have shaped the relationships within the coffee commodity chain. With which fair trade coffee is trying to renegotiate a fairer deal through fair trade cooperatives. In Costa Rica such programs have been met with mixed success. Costa Rica's agricultural economy has been supportive of coffee production, but with pressure from the above transnational companies and the failure of the International Coffee Organisation, who regulated international coffee prices, the price of coffee has fallen well below sustainable levels. Such actions have disrupted the practices of farmers who because of the unreliable economic activity of coffee have either changed their crop or moved into the realm of better quality coffee, which is usually supported by fair trade organisations. This has the benefit of receiving a larger return on the coffee bean, a washed bag of arabica beans is guaranteed a price of US\$ 1.26. Which is above the normal average coffee price of around 60c a bag (Sick, 2008 p. 197). The next major benefit of Fair Traded coffee is the democratic conditions a fair trade cooperative encourage. Such as providing small farmers with an

economic scales, which allow farmers to make informed decisions about coffee prices, and involve them in the complexities of world markets. Giving them a better understanding of where they sit in political and economic time and space. Fair trade cooperatives also encourage better working conditions and socially include female's in coffee production. Such practices have increased the social capital of these farming communities drawing out the story of hardships surrounding our morning lattes.

Fair trade might have opened up new markets but it has also highlighted the dark underbelly of the conventional coffee market. Costa Rican farmers engaging in fair trade in have had mixed expectations and reactions surrounding the simplified system. The mixed feelings are understandable given the interruption such as new system may have thrust upon farmers whom are used to the exploitive transitional corporations. High on farmers list of concerns is the low demand for fair traded coffee. Fair trade only made up a small percentage of world wide sales, approximately \$1.6 billion in 2005 (Sick, 2008 pp. 196 and 199). Moreover, the cost of becoming a fair trade certified farm is borne by the farmer this includes the changes to the farm and the cost of inspection to ensure it meets the social and productional standards. Such low demand and high cost has been limiting the alternative choices with most farmers selling some of their production in the conventional way. These structural ingredients are effecting the socio-spatial and economic perceptions of fair traded coffee. While the fair traded market is more simple, participating in both can become confusing and just add to the complications of a very complex web of relationships. Yet farmers continual to use the fair trade markets as an opportunity to partake in a more lucrative trade. To be more competitive some farmers are contesting the expectations and adding new cost saving feature to their farms. Such as wastewater purification tanks and coffee-husk composting. These initiatives are becoming a standard feature in parts of Costa Rica coffee production. Allowing more of the manufacturing process to be undertaken at the farm. Other farmers are taking different forms of action by focusing locally. Offering coffee farm tourer guides where they are able to sell their coffee direct to the consumer, at a better value (Sick, 2008 pp. 201-202). All these practices, some beneficial, some limiting and some more adaptive add to the complexity of understanding ones role in the complex relationships that exist within the coffee chain.

The production and consumption of fair traded coffee in the globalised market, optimised locally, and negotiated with in a web of complex relationships is in danger of being the thing it aimed to replace. Fair

trade aims to lessen the ailment and the complexity of globalisation. As Foster suggested by simplifying the commodity system so people could see their place within it (Foster, 2006 p. 285). Yet it also places individuals under the guidance of a new system who have the power to exploit farmers. Its movement is ideological based in the idea of social justice in an unfair system. Yet it faces the possibility of becoming like the transnational corporation it aims to replace. Remember Tony and his problems of getting his coffee sold in the terminal at JFK airport, in order to get even close he had to operate in multiple class's. Fair traded coffee may be alienating people in the same way (Reichman, 2008 p. 107). Fair trade is structured in such a way that it determines the conditions on which fair trade coffee is organised. This can be seen in both the Starbucks Fair trade program and in Costa Rica. The Starbucks CAFÉ program has a set of requirements for coffee and economic accountability, as they call it. Starbucks assess's the equality of the system by the distribution of profit across the supply chain. Starbucks measures compliance of the social aspects of the program by a self regulating system and inspections (Macdonald, 2007 pp. 801-802). Such system's may not add to an individuals identity within the coffee chain, it may just add to the confusion, as many of these system are often contested and renegotiated often. This could make it harder for small farmers to change to the free trade system, it may even be a reason to avoid that system altogether. This is what is happening in some parts of Costa Rica near the town of Coopeagri, with many famers moving away from coffee and buying up other business to support their families and carve out an identity for themselves outside the traditional coffee markets (Sick, 2008 pp. 201-202). They are moving to these new forms of economic income to protect themselves from market instability that even fair trade is not immunised too. What fair trade and conventional markets do is take away enterprise from polybians like Tony, operating in multiple class to see a product though to its many stages, and to create an identity around it.

The global complex web of relationships surrounding coffee illustrates Watson and Caldwell's statement that, 'food practices are implicated in a complex field of relationships, expectations, and choices that are contested, negotiated, and often unequal' (Watson and Caldwell, 2005 p. 1). Exploring different examples of this complexity this essay investigated the unequal relationships between farmers, producers and consumers that underpins this complexity, and the attempts to fix the situation though alternatives such as fair trade. It seems that coffee is in a love affair with the globalized world from the polybians class of people like Tony

struggling to play in a larger game, to the lingua franca of Starbucks emerging in a globalized world with yet a localized feel connecting young people all over the world, and the fair trade movement who despite good intentions is having ideological problems. Our morning coffee is more than just a caffeine hit it involves many actors and agents who are shaping its future, we all have to possible to influence this system got the better or worse.

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