Asymmetries and Opportunities: power and inequality in Fairtrade wine global production networks

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Abstract

Fairtrade is changing. The hegemonic certified system, governed by Fairtrade International, has seen some high-profile withdrawals by major processors and retailers in recent months, which is leading to both proponents and critics questioning who, and what, the system is for now. While the certified system has seen increasing conventionalisation, there remains at its core a mission to make trade fair, empower those marginalised in global trade and foster sustainable livelihoods. Taking a global production network framework supports a critical exploration of the market, social and political asymmetries of this international system of production and distribution. Drawing on empirical evidence from the wine industry, the paper takes a production-space perspective to critically reflect on some of the key relations within Fairtrade GPNs. While there are many positive impacts, particularly in social development, experiences of a conventionalisation of supply chains, a lack of contextual responsiveness and limited engagement with the global system point to a continuation of power asymmetries that are intersecting, multiscalar and evolving. Although these are just from a few case studies, anecdotal evidence suggests that they are not uncommon experiences and even a hint of unfair, disempowering and unsustainable trading practices negatively impacts both these producers' livelihoods and the reputation of the Fairtrade system as a whole. Nonetheless, there remains significant producer buy-in indicating that the ideals of Fairtrade retain currency. This therefore presents a critical opportunity for Fairtrade to actively address the market, social and political inequalities that persist in its GPNs and re-establish itself as a leader in the ethical marketplace.

1. Introduction

Certified Fairtrade has operated since the early 1990s as an 'alternative model of trade… based on ensuring market access for producers who are marginalised by conventional trade… [through] fair trading relations including minimum prices, additional social premiums and improved terms of trade' (Fairtrade Foundation 2006). While initially championing the small-scale producers considered the most vulnerable to global trade inequalities (Trauger 2014), the mainstreaming strategy adopted in the late 1990s extended standards to new products and plantation-style production systems. This market growth was also grounded in the entrance of more 'traditional players', such as Walmart and Tesco in 2005, although the inclusion of these large corporations has resulted in both ideological and practical challenges. Who should Fairtrade's partners be and what form should the relationships between them take?

Many authors have explored and critiqued Fairtrade's mainstreaming processes (see, for example, Dolan 2010; Lockie 2008), and so this paper aims to consider instead some of the impacts of mainstreaming in Fairtrade production spaces. Despite continuing rhetoric within Fairtrade for transparency, democracy and empowerment, there has been a trend towards conventionalisation through globalised marketisation. The bureaucratisation and professionalisation of this global system has arguably privileged a 'techno-procedural logic' that focuses more on the tools of certification than the underlying values (Renard and Locanto 2013). Nonetheless, there are challenges to this and taking a global production network (GPN) framework helps us to explore this global politics of production and distribution (Phillips 2017). Henderson et al (2002) offer three conceptual categories to analyse the complex structures and dynamics of GPNs: value, power and embeddedness. While these are interdependent, the focus here is on the power relations that forge Fairtrade's transnational networks (Quastel 2011) and shape producer experiences.

Barrientos (2013) reflects that GPNs provide a useful conceptual framework in a context of power asymmetries, which can cut across the dimensions of market, social and political power (Phillips 2017). Although the international compact between producers, certifiers, traders, retailers and consumers at the heart of Fairtrade is grounded in ideals of connectivity and responsibility, the empirics presented here illustrate the persistent, evolving and intersectional nature of inequalities within Fairtrade GPNs. This paper draws on multi-sited qualitative research conducted with hired labour and small producer organisations (SPOs) in South Africa (January-April 2015), Argentina (April-June 2016) and Chile (June-September 2016), which focused on analysing the practices, experiences and relations of different stakeholders within certified Fairtrade. In particular it draws on semi-structured interviews with 25 small producers, 40 farmer-owners/managers in hired labour and 25 industry and government stakeholders to open out some of the continuing power asymmetries and critically reflect on the relationships within contemporary Fairtrade GPNs. Drawing predominantly on production spaces, it focuses particularly on the relations producers have with the certifier and retailers to explore the impacts of a mainstreamed and marketized Fairtrade. Experiences of unfair trading practices and an ongoing sense of distance between

different nodes in the system highlights continuing power imbalances in the form of a conventionalisation of supply chain relations and disconnection within Fairtrade International (FTI) itself[i]. The paper concludes that although there remains a need for 'fair' trade, whether the certified system can take the opportunities these changes present to promote best practice is open for debate.

2. The Global Fairtrade Production Network

Fairtrade, like any market trading system, depends on a whole network of willing participants from producers to packers, processors, distributors, exporters, importers, retailers and consumers. However, in Fairtrade this is supplemented by its embeddedness in the social and political frameworks that set certification standards. Fairtrade is dependent on the co-constitutive relationship between – and putting this rather simplistically – producer, certifier, retailer and consumer. While conventional GPNs are grounded in similar relationships, the voluntary engagement with progressive politics alongside the NGOs and activists involved in ethical trade systems makes them distinctive. Fairtrade is built on a social compact between these actors, which was initially established to challenge the power asymmetries of conventional trading relations.

Understanding the multiscalar and dynamic Fairtrade GPN requires a recognition that economic relations are ultimately social relations (Archer and Fritsch 2010). Indeed, Archer and Fritsch (2010: 121) argue that, through Fairtrade, 'global economic relations… have been shrunk to local social relations', and this relational politics of place encourages a recognition of our 'responsibility towards the wider relations on which we depend' (Massey 2004: 17). Nonetheless, while a GPN lens provides 'insights into the complexity of commercial-social inter-linkages and tensions' (Barrientos 2013: 45), it has rarely been linked with debates on inequalities (Phillips 2017). This has arguably been exacerbated in mainstreamed Fairtrade as it has become decontextualized, disconnected from its roots in specific local contexts (Hughes et al. 2014; Naylor 2014). In order to conceptualise Fairtrade's geographies and asymmetries, we need to understand the local qualifications that emerge as Fairtrade moves from the abstract to the concrete (Staricco 2017) and the localised impacts on particular producer communities (Hughes et al. 2014). The scales within GPNs are inseparable with both horizontal and vertical power relations shaping Fairtrade's perpetual dynamism (*ibid*); despite its globalising strategies, Fairtrade practices always impact locally.

Doherty et al (2012) propose that Fairtrade needs to 're-personalise' ethics and push standards up the value chain but, as Alagiah (in Lamb 2008, vii) argues, Fairtrade is 'not about how we can buck the market but about how we can bend it' and here lies the innate unpredictability and tension at its heart. It relies on each Fairtrade partner to fulfil their capability to produce, comply, certify, involve, buy, sell, spend and inspire but what happens when new alliances form? When new actors or interests emerge? FTI seeks to respond to these contingencies and ensure that the system remains grounded in its stated core discourses of transparency, democracy, connection and empowerment through enforcing certain standards for both

producers and traders. However, critics have argued that, to encourage the involvement of corporations, and so increase the market impact of Fairtrade, standards have been diluted (Dine 2013). This is argued to weaken the rigour and credibility of the system as a whole because Fairtrade is now certifying the very commodity chains it was formed to counteract (Jaffee 2012). In turn, this leads to more conventional supply chain and production space relations (Naylor 2014); although, while the terms of solidarity within the global Fairtrade system may be set by the transnational elite (Besky 2015), there remains a constant tension between marketisation and social protection against that marketisation.

As Barrientos (2013) notes power can be contested through means other than the control of resources, and in Fairtrade power is dispersed and contested through multiple sites and across the scales (Quastel 2011). Nevertheless, retailers retain a degree of power over certified producers with market, social and political inequalities continuing to be reproduced in Fairtrade's ethical complex. Until recently Fairtrade certification proved attractive to multinational processers and retailers because it provided an externally controlled and audited accreditation process, which allowed access to the 'world's most recognised ethical brand' (Blowfield and Dolan 2010b, 488). However, critics argue that this has been co-opted through the system's dependence on the very corporations it seeks to regulate (Bacon 2010), with efforts at including small producers and workers in the governance of the global system remaining symbolic (Besky 2015). Nevertheless, this masks the fact that Fairtrade is, to some extent, holding transnationals to account for the social effects of their commercial practices (Jaffee 2012) and 'has injected an ethical sensibility into trade that did not exist 20 years ago' (Healy 2009, 341). While this more hopeful approach is appealing (Author, under review), it does not alter the recent demonstrations that 'if the forms of relation demanded by an ethical complex become too constraining, capital may simply withdraw' (Quastel 2011: 459). This commercial pressure ensures that market, social and political power (Phillips 2017) remains with the retailers, having widespread impacts on the terms of their relations with both FTI and certified producers and workers worldwide.

3. Asymmetries of Market Power: producer-retailer relations and unfair trading practices

FTI has adopted a 'theory of change' that is operationalising the organisation's aims of making trade fair, empowering small producers and workers, and fostering sustainable livelihoods in part through supply chain business practices; 'traders are welcome to join Fairtrade if they are committed to supporting these Fairtrade objectives' (Fairtrade International 2015, 3). Here, the standards relating to business and development practices are of particular interest and relate to companies that buy directly from producers, buy and sell Fairtrade products up until they are in their final packaging or have signed a licence agreement. All are subject either to a physical audit or, in the case of the latter, a monitoring system. Business and development standards relate to contracts, price and Fairtrade Premium, timeliness of payments, access to finance, sharing risks, capacity building and trading with integrity. Changes to these are made periodically as part of the regular monitoring and consultation processes of FTI.

As in Hughes et al (2014) it is important to acknowledge Fairtrade's extensive success stories. Several organisations recounted very positive experiences with buyers and retailers, reflecting on additional sponsorship for social and infrastructure projects including a renovated sports ground in Chile, an agrotechnical college in Argentina and a mobile computer centre in South Africa. However, a sense of inequality within these relationships was clear in many accounts of 'value chain struggles' (Hughes et al. 2014; Neilson and Pritchard 2009). For some groups, this amounted to a pressure to adopt certain Premium projects, in particular enforcing a focus on community projects before the producers themselves would necessarily have chosen to:

> '…the English are not buying if we don't do that [referring to a social project supporting a local school's library] because they want social project and we know that [retailer] needs that for a poster…' (Fairtrade producer, Chile, 2016)

> '…sometimes importers, let's say, push, in a nice way, but push about doing projects immediately in the community… So, OK, they agree because they're going to make a sale…' (Gestor de Fortalecimiento, GdF formerly known as a Fairtrade Liaison Officer, Chile, 2016)

This demonstrates a lack of capability to take control over decisions but for others this loss of power went further, impacting on their achievement of all three of FTI's aims. The experience of Bodega Furlotti speaks to the challenges faced in terms of unfair trading practices, and their implications for empowerment, sustainable livelihoods and fair trade.

Bodega Furlotti is a boutique winery in Mendoza, Argentina, which was instrumental in establishing the country's first Fairtrade-certified wine grape SPO. The winery was initially successful in finding markets for the wine produced, winning a Systembolaget[ii] tender and a Walmart contract; however, engaging with the former proved problematic:

> '…we bought special bottles because we were promised three containers… we made a special fractionation, we bought the inputs for the three containers and they received one and they told us that they did not want the other two. And we had to go out and sell the bottles ourselves… we lost a mountain of costs…' (Agronomist 2016)

Bodega Furlotti's owner added:

> '…I said "what the hell am I going to do with the bottles and with the wine I made for you?", "Your problem"… at the beginning Systembolaget were asking for wine Fairtrade at $5 and now they're asking for wine Fairtrade at $3. Who's going to deliver those prices? We can't.'

While Bodega Furlotti had to guarantee to produce the 60,000 bottles awarded by the tender, there was no guarantee that Systembolaget would buy them. The suddenness of the termination, and lack of prior communication, highlights the ongoing power imbalances in this trading relationship. Systembolaget are the only way of accessing the potentially lucrative Swedish market and operate on the basis of competitive tenders, some of which are specifically for 'ethical wine'. Their monopoly and gatekeeper status grant them significant power in the growing Fairtrade wine market. Bodega Furlotti had a similar experience with Walmart when sales volumes were halved with no prior warning and no option to make gradual

adjustments over time. The winery owner noted that buyers were often reluctant to make contracts and, when she complained to FTI, she was informed it was her fault for breaking the rules by accepting the lack of contract. She argued that the onus was placed on her because FTI was reluctant to antagonise the big buyers, who are important for the sales volumes that give Fairtrade its market and social impact. As a small winery, Bodega Furlotti felt 'caught in the middle' and unable to challenge these inequitable trading relations due to the lack of support from FTI.

These experiences are mirrored in Viña Caupolican, a certified association of 22 Chilean small wine grape producers and a trader of wines. A few years ago, following several years of excellent harvests, supply vastly outweighed market demand for red wine and the producers were getting desperate. They had a backlog of wine, prices were dropping and they needed to sell in order for both the producers and the association to survive. As one of the producers recalled (interview, 2016):

> '…we had harvests from 2012, 13 and 14 accumulated and I met this guy that is proposing things so I'm happy. But then 6 months go … 9 months and I started trying to sell at low, I mean, at cost price… I need cash to eat… So <retailer> made an offer and he forgot forever that he had said $0.90, and he said "OK, so your price is 65". I said yes and I was happy to sell and I knew was under minimum Fairtrade…but I didn't, you know, insist so much…we earned nothing but got out of, rid of the stock and we had some cash… but there is the bonus, so they get this bonus, and this is much better than not selling Fairtrade so we could live on that…'

However, the UK's Fairtrade Foundation found out and pointed out that this is not legal; as the Fairtrade Trader Standard states 'the Fairtrade Minimum Price is an absolute minimum' (Fairtrade International 2015, 29). The Fairtrade Foundation offered to explain this to the client but, because contracts are only signed per vintage, Viña Caupolican was concerned about its future relationship with this particular retailer and asked the Fairtrade Foundation:

> '…"don't get in now - we want to sign the second contract for next year because … we lose this client immediately". "No, no, OK, when you have signed the second year contract, we'll be auditing them and we will be explaining that it's nothing that has to do with you…"' (Caupolican Producer, 2016)

In the end, the association had to borrow $50,000 to continue running but did manage to maintain their annual contracts with the retailer. The pressure on prices, the lack of long-term commitments and the opaque communication practices experienced by Bodega Furlotti and Viña Caupolican all indicate a conventionalisation of Fairtrade supply chain relationships as these practices are all arguably proscribed under the requirement to 'trade with integrity'. Phillips (2017) argues that GPNs depend on such inequalities as they are founded in market strategies that harness global asymmetries of power. These experiences highlight the continuation within certified GPNs of asymmetries in market power, positioned by Phillips (2017: 432) as 'the relative position of firms within GVC structures… and the ways these positions correspond with degrees of control over production and the capture of wealth'. Here, retailers retain a degree of monopsony power in relation to Fairtrade wine producers, who struggle to negotiate these

commercial pressures, which shows that marginality can be shaped as much by the terms of inclusion as exclusion from economic activity (*Ibid*). Such power struggles in supply chains shift where value is captured (Bacon 2013), impacting on market access, network relations, financial sustainability and community empowerment, amongst others. This highlights the innate tensions within the interplay between the territorial and the network (Hess 2004), which together embed Fairtrade, and emphasizes the relationality of the actors whose practices and connections shape the system. Fairtrade is 'an uneven and often contradictory combination of different relations' (Bacon 2013: 101); the evolving nature of the GPN requires a recognition that the diverse norms and logics that become embedded in the local Fairtrade production space are fluctuating and intersectional. While a producer may have a degree of market power, this does not necessarily translate into other arenas or relations with other network actants.

The presence of such economic and political interests with the power to act at a distance points to some broader challenges within the Fairtrade system: who participates in its governance? What power do corporations or SPOs have to shape and influence the system? What capacity do Fairtrade auditors and regulators have to challenge non-compliances? How can Fairtrade enrol potential stakeholders into its 'theory of change'? The background to Bodega Furlotti and Viña Caupolican's experiences is different but the impacts are similar. Any moves away from what makes Fairtrade alternative to conventional market and trading relations undermines both the viability of these producers and the credibility of the system as a whole. Although producers and traders may both be involved for a multitude of reasons, the original ideals of Fairtrade – connection, democracy, transparency – retain particular relevance for its core constituents of small producers and hired labour (Naylor 2014). Admittedly these are just two experiences from a sector of 38 producer organisations that has existed for 15 years but anecdotal evidence, alongside the also disempowering pressure for particular Premium projects, suggests that market asymmetries in terms of powerlessness within trading relationships remain a reality for many Fairtrade producers. Furthermore, their struggles are compounded by a lack of connection with the European-based regulatory body.

4. Asymmetries of Social and Political Power: producer-certifier relations and disconnection

Phillips (2017) argues that asymmetries in market power alone cannot explain the reproduction of inequalities within a GPN - it is critical to understand their intersection with asymmetries in political and social power. These refer to the contexts in which GPNs are rooted, the social relations between actors and the political dynamics that structure network governance. Internally, FTI is understood as a 'very consultative movement' (International Development Director, FTI, Interview, 2015), with standards and pricing reviews embedded in extensive consultations; 'we try to actually contact people who are quite close to the product to see what we need to change' (Head of Standards, FTI, Interview, 2015). Nonetheless, and despite the changes that occurred in the FTI constitution in 2013 (Bennett 2015), a lack of connection was common amongst both Fairtrade producers and those working in the producer networks.[iii] There was

a sense of distance between the offices where the standards were set and the fields in which they were enforced:

> *'Every country's unique… and that again is a big frustration… the people that draw up Fairtrade standards first of all have never worked on a farm and understand how farming works, secondly they've never run a business so they don't know how a business operates… whatever they think would be nice to put in there they put in there, not realising what the implications are' (Fairtrade Producer, South Africa, 2015)*

> *'…it's still a north to south relationship. As much as they do studies, research, etc, here on producer level, decisions and perspectives and paradigms are created, maintained up north…' (Fairtrade Africa Representative, 2015)*

Such issues with regulations highlight ongoing challenges in terms of cross-cultural communication and ensuring the effective participation of those in Fairtrade production areas in system governance. Without building understanding between the different parts of Fairtrade, the system remains open to promoting paternalistic or potentially harmful practices (Anderson 2013). This also holds for relationships within the Fairtrade system itself, which for the GdFs were transformed in 2013 when the terms of their employment changed. Previously they had worked directly for FTI but now they work through their regional producer networks. As the Argentinean GdF (Interview, 2016) commented:

> *'I feel further from Fairtrade because before we had a more direct contact and then it was more like an interchange with Fairtrade as to what was happening and the particular situations of the products and the producers… now I feel closer because I belong to a network and I feel closer to other producers and …people like me but further from Fairtrade, I feel closer to CLAC… before I felt closer to the system, I felt like I was closer to where they developed the criteria and where they audited and, well, now it is like another thing.'*

This was echoed by the GdF for Chile who agreed that now the only relationship was with CLAC. They also commented that the change came suddenly and with little consultation; furthermore, the disconnection from FTI was compounded by their limited job security. Despite being the 'face' of Fairtrade to producers, the GdFs are only on annual contracts and FTI gave them little warning and no support in negotiating their new contracts with CLAC. This left them feeling disconnected although their regional connections within Latin America have been enhanced. Given CLAC's owner status since 2013, this should arguably feed into a greater sense of engagement in the governance of the Fairtrade system as a whole. However, the relationship with CLAC seemed to act more as a separator than a facilitator of connection with FTI.

Both producers and those working in the system should feel, at the very least, an engagement with the global system. This lack, as expressed by stakeholders in South Africa, Chile and Argentina, could be positioned in terms of accountability, participation, care or responsiveness; a lack of each contributes to the sense expressed by various stakeholders of being disempowered, voiceless and invisible within a global machine. The bureaucratic governance processes, which have made a mainstream and globalised Fairtrade possible, have also served to dis-embed it from those who live and work Fairtrade in their everyday lives, and the places that shape these. GPNs always 'touch down' somewhere (Neilson et al. 2014) and so

attention to their politics and practices in generating particular localized outcomes is essential (Hughes et al. 2014). Context is key; practices and relations work across scales but impact locally. Fairtrade is an international organisation trying to maintain a cohesive and 'fair' global network across a geographically and qualitatively diverse range of products and production systems. At times, the needs of different stakeholders will clash; after all, 'producers' are not a homogenous grouping. This constant tension between a macro-scale homogenising trade justice and a micro-scale responsive articulation of care (Author, under review) needs to be negotiated through the contexts that ground Fairtrade's GPNs.

5. Conclusions

This is clearly not an exhaustive account and has focused on some perhaps unexpected relations, given Fairtrade's ethos. Nonetheless, despite the challenges faced, all stakeholders retained a strong degree of buy-in for Fairtrade, identifying many positive developmental and market benefits. The original need identified by Fairtrade persists but, I would argue, systemic changes are necessary to ensure that the Fairtrade system remains fit for purpose. Through the empirics, practices emerged that are counter to the achievement of empowerment, fairness and sustainability and, while these are only isolated case studies and their generalisability cannot be confirmed, I would argue that even the presence of a few instances of unfair trading practices, disempowering outcomes and unsustainable relations serves to negatively impact on the system as a whole. Practices of conventionalisation, highlighted here in terms of market and system relationships, demonstrate continuing asymmetries in terms of market, social and political power, which emphasize the flexibility and contingency to the normative foundations of any GPN (Archer and Fritsch 2010). Fairtrade has had its successes in the empirical cases discussed here but vulnerabilities persist and evolve. It is clear that inequalities within Fairtrade GPNs are not produced or reproduced in identical ways, instead they are multiscalar, dynamic, contextual and intersecting.

In the contemporary context of capital withdrawal (Quastel 2011), what then does this mean for Fairtrade? There remains 'intense competition on ethical performance' (Food Ethics Council 2008, 1) with risk management necessitating an engagement with 'responsible sourcing', so are we seeing a new phase in the Fairtrade market? Although Fairtrade GPNs are becoming more conventional in their practices, Fairtrade has arguably institutionalised goals of fairness and value in corporate networks (Barrientos 2013). Nonetheless, Fairtrade needs to build on this overall raising of standards to maintain its position as an ethical market pioneer through re-engaging its discursive ideals with its system practices. A critical first step is acknowledging the persistence of network inequalities, which offers the valuable opportunity to reflect on the producer side impacts of Fairtrade's mainstreaming and question what should the relationship between Fairtrade partners be like? The power to act currently remains embedded in the Global North, with disempowerment experienced by producers in market, social and political arenas. However, the empirics do offer glimpses of challenges to this, with the regional scale in particular opening up as a site of contestation (Barrientos 2013) and leverage points in the relations between producer,

retailer and certifier being exploited. The increasing competition and diversity in the ethical food sector could enforce a re-evaluation and transformation of the relationships that structure Fairtrade's social compact but only if Fairtrade actively engages with the opportunities for best practice this presents, and resists the more usual 'race to the bottom'. In order to build on its historic position as an ethical market leader, Fairtrade needs to embrace this new phase by strengthening its internal relations, addressing persistent inequalities, to raise Fairtrade standards and establish its GPNs as care-full, responsive and equitable.

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[i] Fairtrade International is the global standards and certification body for Fairtrade.

[ii] The Swedish state-owned alcohol monopoly.

[iii] These changes gave the producer networks of Fairtrade Africa, the Latin American and Caribbean Network of Fair Trade Small Producers and Workers (CLAC) and the Network of Asian and Pacific Producers (NAPP) 50% ownership of the system.