Fair Trade and Social Justice

Global Ethnographies

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NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York & London
2010
On a cold winter night over milky, sugary cups of tea, I talked with fair trade plantation workers about politics in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, tucked in the Himalayan foothills. Like on many evenings, we argued about the effectiveness of Darjeeling's political parties and politicians. Slamming his hand down on the sticky plastic table, Pranit said, "They eat all the money and buy new clothing and cars with it." "Wrong! We will get our separate state and help us get better wages on the plantation," said Kancha, cigarette hanging out of his mouth as he heaped white rice onto a plate. Someone else chimed in: "All that happens are cultural programs—dance, dance, dance; clothes, clothes, clothes—that is all they want to talk about."

"Darjeeling life is like that," said an old woman crouched in the corner without looking up from her dented stainless-steel cup filled with tea. Later, the cups were filled with military-issue whiskey, and our conversation turned to the politics of the plantation itself. Jesthi told the story of a friend: "he couldn't get a loan to fix his house... The company used to give loans."

"Isn't that what the 'fair trade committee' [Joint Body] does?" I asked.

"Not anymore... The company eats all the money, and we drink this black, black tea," she replied, referring to the cheap CTC tea we were drinking, produced in plains south of Darjeeling. Everyone turned to Gautam. We all knew him as one of the few people privileged with knowledge of the higher-level functions of the plantation. Silence. "What is the Joint Body anyway?" I asked. Silence. I kept looking at him.

"Manioparda" (I don't like it), he said, shaking his head and hands. "Why?" I asked.

Colonial Pasts and Fair Trade Futures
Changing Modes of Production and Regulation on Darjeeling Tea Plantations

SARAH BESKY
"Man-par-dai-na," he repeated deliberately. I gave him a puzzled look. After some contemplation, he explained, "You know the problem with Darjeeling politics?" with obvious reference to the last conversation. "That is why I don't like it [the Joint Body];" and the conversation screeched to an uncomfortable halt.

The plantation is the primary land tenure system for Indian tea, particularly in Darjeeling. Sloping green hillsides of neatly lined tea bushes surround the towns of the Darjeeling district. Where one of the eighty-seven plantations begins and another ends is often marked only by a narrow tree line or a natural drainage ditch running down the mountainside, if at all. Whether the plantations are conventional or fair trade certified, their tasks and organization are roughly the same. Most large plantations contain not only fields of tea bushes but also processing factories. While some men work as field laborers, women dominate the fields and the plucking of tea by hand. In the factory, men operate the machines and pack tea in the factory, while women hand sort the tea after processing. The average Darjeeling plantation has approximately seven hundred permanent factory and field laborers and hires additional seasonal help during the boom in production that comes with the monsoon rains. Permanent workers receive a daily wage that remains constant throughout the year. Each one of these laborers often supports four or more family members, who do not work on the garden but reside in one of the several plantation villages, which vary in proximity to the factory, towns, and roads.

Fair trade has made little impact on Darjeeling tea plantations. The most positive effect of certification is that people feel free to talk, albeit behind closed doors and in cryptic statements, about how deplorable and often illegal the conditions of their life and employment really are. In this chapter, I use a regulation approach to discuss the obstacles of certifying a plantation as fair trade. If democracy is at the core of the fair trade movement and the articulation of its standards, then how can a plantation, an inherently unequal land-tenure system, ever really be fair? Darjeeling plantations have taken steps toward becoming more "fair," but these steps were not the result of international certification schemes, such as fair trade, which have left workers little tangible benefits. Fair trade, as I argue in this chapter, is instead entwined in neoliberal economic practices (Fridell 2007).

Longstanding, colonial-inspired institutions still play a major role in regulating how Indian tea plantations operate. Tea is generally auctioned in large centers across the country, where bidders and brokers argue over and set the prices for all grades and regions of Indian tea. After Indian independence, national laws, specifically the Plantations Labor Act of 1951, were put in place to protect workers from mistreatment at the hands of plantation owners. In Darjeeling, these regulatory institutions—tea auctions and labor laws—are currently being upset by fair trade certification. Labor law and the auction system work within the parameters of the plantation system, an unequal land-tenure system in which the owners' economic best interest is to cut production costs and to maximize profits. These regulatory institutions serve as a check on this behavior; they serve to balance the inequities of the plantation system.

Today, planters seek to "update" the "irrelevant" sections of the Plantations Labor Act (PLA), namely, the social welfare clauses that dictate that owners provide workers houses, medical facilities, firewood, and food rations, which burden the owners with what they call "social costs." Owners believe that existing government structures could abdicate them of this financial burden. Members of the Darjeeling Tea Association, the plantation owners' organization, are lobbying the central government to rewrite the PLA so that they do not have to bear these social costs and provide such support. The owners contend that workers should provide these things for themselves. Even as they lament paying the "social costs," these plantation owners are seeking fair trade certification. Not only does fair trade certification attest to the equitable treatment of workers, but it also provides owners a way to get their tea directly to foreign and boutique markets, circumventing the auction system. In this chapter, I discuss the problems that fair trade certification, with its emphasis on direct trade, has created for workers on Darjeeling tea plantations. I make a rather counterintuitive suggestion: perhaps colonial institutions and modes of regulation, such as tea auctioning and colonial-inspired labor codes, can be more effective regulators of social justice and fair prices than neoliberal regulatory institutions such as fair trade, with its emphasis on individual rights and empowerment. These regulations, unlike those of fair trade, account for the power of individual owners to manipulate the system to maximize profits. In Darjeeling, fair trade standards from the Fair Trade Labelling Organizations International (FLO) have undermined what local laws and government labor officers have done to promote social justice in Darjeeling.

Further complicating the Darjeeling tea market is that prices of Darjeeling tea fluctuate dramatically throughout the year because of what growers refer to as "flushes." There are four flushes, or seasons—first (mid-
March–mid-April), second (mid-April–May), monsoon (June–August), and autumn (September–November). Darjeeling’s first and second flushes are the most prized and produce some of the highest priced teas in the world. Managers have explained to me that a Darjeeling garden makes all its annual money before the start of the monsoon at the end of May, when the heavy rains start and the quality of the leaf changes, becoming bigger and more fibrous. Furthermore, certain gardens are deemed more desirable according to the direction they face, the valley they are in, or their general waste ("property") implying their position in the cosmic geography of the universe. A garden can make anywhere from Rs. 18,000 (US$74) to Rs. 200 ($5) or less per kilogram for leaf-grade teas at the Kolkata auction. Finding meaningful statistics is difficult for two reasons: First, there are several grades of leaf tea, all yielding different prices—from STGFOP (Special Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe), FTGFOP (Fine Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe), TGFOP, GFOP, FOR, to OP (Orange Pekoe), broken leaf, and fannings. Second, it is difficult for the Tea Board to report on private sales, the dominant method of marketing among fair-trade-certified tea producers in Darjeeling. During my research in 2008 and 2009, I occasionally heard the prices at which traders bought directly from fair trade gardens, but even these prices fluctuated greatly, depending on the nature of the "long-term buying relationships" between traders and plantation owners. People in Darjeeling who make their living either directly or indirectly from the fair trade tea industry, although they know little about direct sales, continue to argue about the business. Some contend that the plantation owners, who are not from Darjeeling, are making windfall profits from private sales of premium-priced fair trade tea but are telling the public otherwise. Supporters of the owners, however, believe that labor costs have reduced profits. Judging by recent changes in fair trade tea standards regarding the distribution of fair trade premiums, FLO seems to believe the owners and their supporters.

This chapter is organized into three sections. I follow a regulation approach, the basics of which I outline in the first section, in which I also discuss how colonial tea production, despite gross inequalities, left independent Indian tea gardens with two key regulatory institutions: the auction and labor laws. In the second section, I describe how fair trade both challenges and furthers neoliberalization, a new "regime of accumulation" in the global market that brings with it new regulatory institutions. In the third section, I compare these neoliberal and colonial institutions and their ability to regulate social justice on Darjeeling tea plantations. I argue that in the case of plantation tea production fair trade is actually a destabilizing force, which erodes the headway that older, colonially rooted modes of regulation have made in maintaining the quality of life on plantations.

The Old Regime: Colonial Tea Production and Regulation Theory

After the Opium Wars of the mid-1800s, the British, seeking to satisfy burgeoning demand for tea within the Empire, set up agricultural experimental stations and botanical gardens to test the potential of tea and other cash crops across India. The scientists at Lloyd Botanical Gardens in Darjeeling deemed that the environment of the Himalayan foothills was conducive to growing tea of the China jat (variety), the more prized variety of tea compared to the Assam jat, which grew wild in the jungles of Assam and was later cultivated on Assam plantations. Tea quickly became the most lucrative crop in the Darjeeling hills. Along with other tea-growing regions across India, Darjeeling supplied demand back home in Britain as well as the growing demand across the new colonies. Tea was a global commodity from the beginning. It was a lucrative export crop and the model British colonial agricultural product. While many other agricultural products of the British Empire, such as cinchona and timber, were used within the colony, tea and its companion, sugar, were produced for consumption for the European and American markets outside the colony (Mintz 1986).

In order to maintain their plantations, the British had to recruit laborers from outside Darjeeling. The reaction of Nepal’s monarchy to British incursions on its territory facilitated this recruitment. After the Anglo-Nepalese Wars (1814–1816), the British annexed most of the lowland Terai, the most fertile part of contemporary Nepal (Burghart 1984: 115), and in 1817 they annexed present-day Darjeeling town from Sikkim. To offset the loss of land, Nepal’s king pressed for the relocation and agricultural intensification of less fertile lands in the eastern hill plains by high-caste Hindus, thus marginalizing those living in these peripheral hill regions (English 1982: 268). Lacking the resources to pay domestic taxes, many eastern hill people migrated to Darjeeling. The British need for labor steadily increased as their plantations developed in Darjeeling. To supply this need, the British began to increase the incentives for laborers to leave their families and homes in Nepal. Promises of housing, health care, land for cultivation and herding, and good schools for their children lured Nepalis to Darjeeling plantations (English 1982: 364; Griffiths 1967: 88). For
most of the nineteenth century, the British stably accumulated wealth and maintained a willing labor force in the Darjeeling hills as a result of the way they structured their plantation system.

In an analysis of the differences between industrial wheat farms and family wheat farms in the United States, Harriet Friedmann elaborated a theory of accumulation that hinged on the idea of reproduction: "Reproduction occurs when the act of production not only results in a product, such as wheat, but also recreates the original structure of social relations so that the act of production can be repeated in the same form" (1978: 555). For Friedmann, industrial reproduction depended on the stability of a wage relation between the buyer of labor power on one side and the seller of labor power on the other. The British Empire successfully cultivated this relationship in India, making it the most financially successful colony in the Empire for over one hundred years. The social relations that defined capitalism reproduced themselves in a stabilized way through extensive bureaucracies and paternalistic welfare practices. Colonial social welfare codes in India facilitated the extraction of tea for a global market. This reproduced social relations between consumers of Darjeeling tea in London and sellers of tea and their labor power in Darjeeling.

Friedmann's focus on the stable accumulation of capital is central to a regulation approach, which is a valuable tool for exploring how institutions influence the flow of capital and shape economic and social relationships. Regulation theorists, drawing on Althusserian Marxism, emphasize the role of institutions, such as families, laws, and bureaucracies, in perpetuating people's willingness to participate in fundamentally unequal systems of production and consumption. Following Althusser, regulation theorists see institutions and regulatory social mechanisms, rather than individual agents, as drivers of social reproduction, thus paralleling Althusser's theoretical concerns with "ideological state apparatuses" (Althusser 1971). Institutions, rather than individual agents, are drivers of social reproduction. While recognizing that capitalist systems, resting on uncertain and unequal arrangements between labor and capital, tend toward crisis, regulation theorists are interested in the long periods of time when capital is accumulated stably. These unwavering periods are called "regimes of accumulation." The regime of accumulation is stabilized (1) at the individual level, by habitus, people's willingness to embody shared social values evidenced in daily practices of movement, labor, and social interaction (Bourdieu 1977), and (2) at the institutional level, by a mode of regulation. The mode of regulation includes wages, tax policies, international agreements, laws, unions, and other things that help reproduce capital accumulation. Instead of focusing on the habitus, regulation theorists scale up their analysis to an institutional level to focus on modes of regulation that enable the stable accumulation of capital. Modes of regulation define a particular relationship between production and consumption and characterize a particular regime of accumulation.

A crisis in a regime of accumulation implies a failure of regulation, the consequence of a deterioration of a mode of regulation and an institution's ability to accumulate capital stably (Goodwin and Painter 1996: 639). The fall of the colonial regime of accumulation in British tea production resonates with the collapse of the Fordist regime of factory production in the United States, the original object of analysis for regulation theorists. What separated Fordism as a distinct regime of accumulation was that capitalists recognized the link between mass production and mass consumption, which led to "a new system of the reproduction of labour power, a new politics of labour control and management, a new aesthetics and psychology, in short, a new kind of rationalized, modernist, and populist democratic society" (Harvey 1989: 126). Fordism hinged on the ability of the workers to purchase the products they produced. The disintegration of Fordism was caused by two factors. First, transactions became more international. Fordism was a "rigid" nation-centered regime; production and consumption were spatially linked. Second, factory owners were not making enough money from production because they were paying their workers high wages and providing welfare through, for example, pensions and health care (Harvey 1989: 142).

Much like the collapse of Fordism, the collapse of colonialism and colonial tea production was instigated by the financial infeasibility of the project. When the British left India, they took their demand for tea with them, turning to their remaining colonies in Kenya (see Dolan, chap. 7, this volume) and Sri Lanka to supply their domestic demand. The tight relationship between production and consumption was broken apart. During the colonial era, the British controlled all aspects of production and marketing. After India gained independence, the British slowly turned their Darjeeling tea plantations over to elite Indians, who quickly found that they did not have enough capital to maintain the plantations. The last British planters and their companies left in the late 1960s, at which point the industry is said to have "collapsed." After the fall of the colonial regime in India, new Indian plantation owners from outside Darjeeling had a surplus of tea and less people to buy it.
Colonialism did not leave India with a strong government, but it did leave it with the infrastructure necessary for a vibrant tea industry. Even after the British left, regulatory institutions that were central to the colonial project, namely, labor codes and tea auctions, remained. In 1951, shortly after independence, India’s central government drafted the Plantations Labor Act, which adapted colonial labor policies into the constitution of independent India. The Plantations Labor Act continues to guarantee plantation workers’ social welfare, insisting that owners provide workers housing, health care, food rations, and schooling for their children. It is the positive legacy of an otherwise exploitative colonial regime. During the production crisis that lasted from the 1960s until the late 1990s, tea continued to be sold at auction in Kolkata, much like it had for the past one hundred years. Many tea plantation owners gained the attention of fair trade certifiers because their relative adherence to the Labor Act made them viable candidates for fair trade certification, which attests to the social welfare of hired agricultural laborers.

The New Regime: Neoliberalism Meets Fair Trade

When fair trade certifiers first came to Darjeeling in the 1990s, fair trade seemed like an optimal way to solve the ills of postcolonial tea production, but it has been far from effective in this regard. Like factory owners under Fordism, Darjeeling planters told me that they are not able to give their workers the benefits that they once were and that labor law should be revised to absolve them of such obligations. They saw fair trade, which emphasizes the equitable treatment of laborers, as a way to avoid these costs and solve marketing woes. Although the loss of the colonial market produced an accumulation crisis in the tea industry, today’s market for Darjeeling tea, touted for its health benefits, is rapidly growing. Fair trade certification attracts owners because (1) FLO encourages owners to sell directly to buyers, enabling them to circumvent the auction system; (2) the money for government-mandated welfare schemes can come from fair trade premiums; (3) demand for fair trade products is high; much like colonial products, there is a built-in market for socially conscious goods; in other words, the relationship between production and consumption has tightened back up; (4) fair trade standards are more flexible than labor law, and since there is minimal oversight, owners can often cut corners on labor practices and still keep fair trade certification.

Fair trade, with its reliance on transnational nongovernmental certifiers and its emphasis on universal notions of social justice and individual rights through “direct trade,” reflects many of the philosophical tenets of neoliberalism. According to many social scientists, notably geographers, neoliberal theory frames today’s regime of accumulation (Jessop 2002; McCarthy 2006; Zimmerman 2006; Harvey 2007). Rooted in neoclassical economics, neoliberalism upholds the free market—a market that is free of obstacles to trade such as national government policies and a market that privileges the power of private interests over publicly held institutions. Neoliberal theory maintains that institutions that preserve strong private-property rights and free markets can best protect individual liberty and freedom. Proponents of neoliberalism claim that the state should not be involved in the economy; instead, the state should use its power to preserve private-property rights and the free market. Neoliberal logic privileges nonstate actors, such as fair trade certification agencies, as the best regulators of capital. It encourages the state to promote the free flow of capital, orienting state power toward capital circulation rather than nationalist protectionism. Not only can nonstate actors accomplish this more effectively, according to neoliberal logic, they can distribute capital in more equitable ways.

To date, most studies on the production of fair trade products have focused on coffee in Latin America and have highlighted how fair trade is an alternative to neoliberal economic policies (Bacon 2005; Lyon 2007; Murray et al. 2006; Renard and Pérez-Grovás 2007; Renard 2003; Rice 2006; Smith 2006; Whatmore and Thorne 1997). Coffee and tea are very different, but boxes of fair trade organic coffee, tea, and other products all explain that consumer revenue goes straight into the pockets of producers, described on the packaging as “empowered small farmers.” Despite an emphasis on small-scale agriculture, FLO allows some products such as bananas and tea to be grown in “hired-labor situations,” fair trade parlance for “on a plantation.” In hired-labor situations, the workers are supposed to democratically elect a body, called the Joint Body, which will decide how to spend the fair trade premium. Darjeeling tea plantations still have Joint Bodies, but the January 2008 FLO mandate has severely eroded the little power they had to control premium spending, as I describe later.

Fair trade certification has created alternative markets for small producers’ goods outside the mass market propagated by neoliberal orthodoxy. Often the literature on fair trade and other socially and environmentally
friendly products focuses on marketing (Barrientos and Smith 2007; Lyon 2006a, 2006b; McDonagh 2002); consumption, specifically how people identify purchasing fair trade or organic commodities with environmentalist practices (Elkington and Hailes 1989; James 1993; Loureiro and Lotade 2004); resistance to conventional production (Shreck 2005); or class distinction (Rosebery 1996). Labels distinguish these alternative markets. Scholarship shows that "fair trade" and "organic" labels act as symbols that affirm consumers' belief that consumption can be a political act (Fisher 2007; Getz and Shreck 2006; Shreck et al. 2006; Howard and Allen 2006; Loureiro and Lotade 2004; Shreck 2005). Geographer Julie Guthman explains that grades and standards in the organic food industry have caused farmers to abandon sustainable methods (1998) or have undermined farmers' attempts to farm in a less intensive manner (2004). Guthman (2007) further argues that voluntary food labels, verifying environmental, social, or geographical values, are intended to counter neoliberal forms of governance. In this volume, however, Smith and Moberg (chaps. 2 and 3) discuss the problems of consumer perceptions that arise from corporate interests such as Starbucks, Chiquita, and Dunkin' Donuts labeling some of their products "fair trade." They may have the largest sales volume of fair trade products, but these products make up a tiny portion of their overall sales. A label has power; in this case, to shift the perceptions of consumers about companies that are only marginally committed to the social and economic conditions of the agricultural communities from which they source. As Smith points out (chap. 2, this volume), consumers are confident about what they purchase because of the standardization of fair trade certification, which is embodied in the fair trade label. Still, many buyers I spoke to said that they did not pay a fair trade premium for the tea they bought from fair trade gardens. On their packaging or marketing materials, they explain that the tea "comes from a fair trade certified estate." It is not "Fair Trade Darjeeling Tea." To a consumer this makes little difference, but to a producer it does. Producers do not receive a premium for tea that is not marked with FLO's or another certifying agency's "fair trade" label.

Despite fair trade's symbolic creation of alternative consumer markets, as Fridell (2007) argues, fair trade is not only an alternative movement. It is also enmeshed in larger processes of neoliberal, consumer-driven social justice. Yet, as a regulation approach shows, fair trade is also part of what Peck and Tickell call "roll-out liberalization," characterized by the "roll-out of new forms of institutional "hardware" (2002: 389). The institutional "hardware" of fair trade certification includes "social" policymaking strategies, led by nongovernmental organizations, aimed at opening trade to the Global South. Fair trade, however, also presents an alternative to neoliberal policies because it seeks to empower those not conventionally empowered in a free-market system. Fair trade aims to direct capital into the hands of empowered small farmers. This ideology of individual freedom and empowerment within a global market is a key tenet of neoliberal orthodox. This paradox is not lost on contemporary scholars, and overcoming it is essential for maintaining the fair flow of goods and capital on the global market.

Neoliberalism, as a regime of accumulation, requires both consumers and laborers to accept new regulatory institutions rooted in ideas of individual empowerment through democracy, the free market, and environmental protection. Neoliberalism favors nongovernmental regulatory institutions, including fair trade certifiers. Kamat explains:

A fundamental cultural transformation involved in the transition from state-led development to a deregulated market economy is that citizens have to forego their sense of entitlement and have to acquire an entrepreneur citizen identity that derives from liberal values of independence and autonomy. . . . The new economic institutions are engaged in this process of advancing a new citizen culture, aiding in the development of an active and dynamic civil society in which all citizens, including the poor, are encouraged to be enterprising and seize the opportunities of the global economy. (2004: 164)

Through certification programs, fair trade links consumers to producers in new ways, reinforcing the idea that a single consumer can empower a single producer through his or her consumption practices. Even though fair trade aims at challenging the inequities of neoliberal accumulation, fair trade philosophy resonates with that of the neoliberal regime of accumulation because, on one hand, the individual farmer is the object of empowerment and the individual consumer is the agent of that empowerment. On the other hand, however, both fair trade and neoliberal philosophy require the farmer to become the "subject" of empowerment. This philosophy is reflected in the numerous "success stories" displayed on the FLO website, one of which I discuss later in this chapter. In the next section, I show how fair trade, as it straddles neoliberalism and its more socially conscious alternatives, has neither gotten rid of farmers' "old"
reliance on the state for social welfare nor eliminated the social welfare shortcomings of postcolonial production.

Out with the Old, in with the New? Fair Trade and the Clash of Regimes

Whereas the colonial regime of accumulation was stable, the neoliberal regime has trouble maintaining stability because it lacks transparent means to ensure social, economic, and environmental development. In the language of regulation theory, fair trade has weakened existing “regulatory institutions” that guaranteed the continued consent of plantation workers to labor in a hierarchical, factory-like system. Fair trade certification has indirectly contributed to the erosion of social, economic, and environmental security. By damaging workers’ faith in both the old colonial power structure and the new NGO-based neoliberal one, these weaknesses have the potential to cause a crisis in each or in all three of the areas FLO claims to be “developing.” Fair trade is both a challenge to neoliberalization, in that it seeks to create new modes of regulation, and a reinforcement of neoliberalism, because it displaces older regulatory frameworks regarding the role of the state and public institutions to regulate the flow of capital. It is fair trade’s tenuous straddling of neoliberalization and consumer-driven social justice that contributes to this destabilization. In this section, I follow the three organizing themes outlined in FLO’s Generic Fairtrade Standards for Hired Labor (FLO 2007b): social development, economic development, and environmental development. I outline the clash of incoming and outgoing modes of regulation, and highlight that fair trade standards have not bolstered social welfare on Darjeeling plantations, despite FLO’s claims. I argue that older institutions of the colonial regime of accumulation are currently doing a better job of bolstering social welfare.

Social Development and Fair Trade Knowledge

According to FLO (2007b), a Joint Body is “an elected group of worker representatives and management representatives who are responsible for jointly managing, investing, and spending the fair trade premium.” The Joint Body must (1) “inform and consult all workers of the company about fair trade standards and the fair trade premium and its use” and (2) “manage and invest the fair trade premium transparently and responsibly.” The Joint Body must be democratically elected through “regular” elections. FLO does not concretely define the intended regularity of meetings. At one fair trade plantation, workers with whom I discussed the Joint Body claimed that there were never elections. Instead, members were “appointed” by the owner. According to FLO, the composition of the Joint Body should reflect the composition of the work force, meaning that on a tea garden, where over 50 percent of the workers are female tea pluckers, the Joint Body should contain a proportional number of pluckers. However, Joint Body members and plantation residents said that the membership comprised few pluckers. Some cynically said that the Joint Body had ceased to exist. All the money, they said, had been “eaten.”

FLO states that knowledge about fair trade is a central component of effective certification. Within one year of certification, all levels of plantation staff must know about the aims and objectives of fair trade as well as the functions of the Joint Body and fair trade premium. The management is supposed to provide this information. On several fair trade plantations, many general laborers knew neither about the aims and missions of fair trade nor what a Joint Body was. A select number of community members who worked in the office or had direct contact with an ecotourism project on the plantation had some idea that there was a Joint Body; however, they understood Joint Body members to be only those that are “in the maktik’s [owner’s] hand.” If they knew that there was a Joint Body, there was no knowledge about who served on it, let alone what it did. Those workers I interviewed who had heard of the Joint Body said that they believed it got its money from foreign donations. On one plantation, workers conflated the Joint Body and all workings of fair trade with a development project on the plantation called the Community Health and Advancement in India (CHAI) program, funded by Tazo Tea (a subsidiary of Starbucks). Some said that the Joint Body gave money to CHAI. Community members showed little knowledge about what fair trade was and how it operated, let alone voiced opinions about how fair trade should work or their confusion about aspects of its operation. This contrasts with some of the evidence in this volume, including Lyon’s descriptions of Guatemalan women’s opinions about the diversification of fair trade buying relations (chap. 6) and Moberg’s explanation of farmers’ thoughts on the economics of pesticide use in the Caribbean (chap. 3). Dolan explains that Kenyan tea-cooperative workers were frustrated with “rerocertification” because it prevents them from planning premium disbursement (chap. 7, this volume). As in Kenya, on Darjeeling plantations of any kind, workers
were unclear about where tea went. Workers said that it went to Kolkata, the site of the port, airport, and auctions, and then to outside countries.

Indian labor laws adapted from the colonial regime require that each plantation have a labor welfare officer, whose job is to translate labor law, which is written in English, into the local language, Nepali. Across Darjeeling, however, owners installed labor officers as assistant managers and saddled them with other duties on top of their obligations to laborers. On Darjeeling fair trade gardens, the labor welfare officers were also appointed as the "fair trade officers" of the Joint Body. FLO requires that each Joint Body have such an officer to organize educational events and spread knowledge about fair trade. These individuals now have three obligations, but those I interviewed told me that their primary obligation is to be a good manager. Fair trade, to adopt regulation theory's use of Althusser's term, is an "ideological apparatus" that is supposed to convince workers to invest their time, labor, and capital into the plantation, but in the case of the Darjeeling tea plantations, it does not seem to be doing anything as effective a job as other examples in this volume. In practice, the involvement of ownership and state labor officers in the Joint Body have undermined rather than promoted workers' ability to access knowledge about their labor rights.

Economic Development

Fair trade has failed to build knowledge about workers' rights. This lack of knowledge, as I argue in this section, has been compounded by (1) a lack of an effective implementation of FLO's minimum price system, (2) a lack of an effective bargaining mechanism for workers because of the owners' co-opting of the Joint Body, and (3) a lack of market transparency in FLO's emphasis on direct trade. In each instance, colonial and neoliberal regulatory institutions are clashing in a mutually destructive manner. FLO's fair trade standards are not effectively arbitrating as a meaningful alternative to either regime.

In January 2008, FLO set the fair trade minimum prices for tea and premiums for dust, leaf, and CTC-grade teas. (CTC, "Cut-Thresh-Curl," is a low-grade tea primarily used domestically with milk.) Darjeeling tea gardens, however, have been exempted from minimum pricing schemes for tea. At coffee cooperatives, workers receive a floor price for unroasted green coffee, as discussed by Lyon and Smith in this volume (chaps. 6 and 2). The minimum price, championed as the keystone to fair trade in coffee, means little to Darjeeling tea laborers, the only group exempt from minimum pricing. Fair trade minimum pricing would mean little for workers in hired-labor situations in the first place. Whether a kilogram of tea sells for Rs. 18,000 or Rs. 200, the Darjeeling tea worker makes exactly the same amount of money, his or her daily wage, regulated by state wage negotiations and labor law. The West Bengal wage tables in 2008 raised the wage from 53.90 rupees a day to 58 rupees a day, just over a dollar a day (according to 2009 rates of exchange). Even in FLO's hired-labor standards, it talks about minimum pricing schemes as if they actually make a difference. All profits on Darjeeling plantations go into the pocket of the plantation owner, not the workers. Fair trade is not changing the wage-labor rate or employment relationship. Workers on fair trade gardens receive the same daily wage as those at conventional gardens. Unlike fair trade, the Indian labor law, adapted from the colonial regime of accumulation, regards the plantation much like a factory, guaranteeing workers a daily wage, not per unit payments. There are several clauses addressing how workers should be paid for overtime and holiday time. Labor law attempts to concretize socially just wages, whereas FLO's "minimum prices" only benefit cooperative farmers, who do not work for wages.

While drinking tea at tea stalls, having a pastry at a fancy Darjeeling bakery, or plucking tea, individuals across social classes and both those directly associated with the tea industry and those just living in Darjeeling told me the plantation owners have misled the community by claiming that the industry is in crisis, which prevents them from raising workers' wages. Unlike the coffee and banana contexts discussed in this volume, fair trade tea workers need to live off the daily wage provided to them by owners. They do not benefit in any direct way from the higher prices received from direct buying relationships. Despite the fact that Darjeeling tea is some of the priciest tea in the world, in West Bengal, where the Darjeeling district is located, tea laborers are paid India's lowest wages. Other tea-producing states in India, such as Kerala and Assam, produce lesser-quality tea, which sells for less on the domestic and international markets. Sanjay Bansal, owner of the fair trade company Ambootia and president of the Darjeeling Tea Association, described the 2008 wage hike to 58 rupees a day as "unprecedented," far too high for the economic conditions of the area, setting an unhealthy trend for future negotiations. Throughout my fieldwork, Bansal and owners of both conventional and fair trade gardens continued lobbying to get the social welfare structures removed and fighting to keep the wages of the workers down.
According to FLO, until there is a fair trade minimum price set for Darjeeling tea, there will be an exception "made in the case of Darjeeling where basic needs for the workers (e.g., housing, water, and sanitation) may be partly financed through the Fairtrade Premium. This is due to the critical economic situation in Darjeeling" (FLO 2007a: 3). Without further explanation of the "critical economic situation," FLO has now made it possible for owners to use fair trade premiums to provide facilities dictated by the Plantations Labor Act of 1951, facilities that they should be providing from their own profits. The fair trade premium is covering the social costs, yet owners are still lobbying for the removal of labor codes.

Even before January 2008, when FLO decided that it was acceptable for Darjeeling plantation owners to use fair trade premium money for the general upkeep of their gardens, FLO had posted another fair trade tea "success story" from a plantation in the Western Ghat Mountains of South India. The press release describes fifty-eight-year-old Manickam, a long-time plantation worker who signed up for a retirement project funded by fair trade premiums, which "gained him the right to receive a monthly pension for the next 15 years—a novelty in a country like India" (FLO n.d.). FLO's press release claimed that workers must leave the plantation after they retire. This is not the norm in Indian tea production. The story explains that retiring is almost impossible in India because there is little access to pensions. Under the fair trade pension scheme in the Western Ghats, workers received Rs. 800 a month if they work for twenty years and Rs. 1,200 a month for thirty years of service. FLO's claims that India does not have pension-fund projects, particularly on tea plantations, overlooks the roles of the institutions that already exist. According to existing Indian law, in addition to their wages, workers on all plantations are entitled to a "provident fund" (essentially a pension), a "gratuity" upon retirement, and an annual bonus for the holiday season. In India, the Employees' Provident Fund Organization of India (EPFO), established after independence, mandates that all owners set aside a percentage of workers' wages in a provident fund to be given to the worker upon retirement.

FLO mandates that unions or some form of democratic organization, outside the Joint Body, collectively bargain for wages and equitable treatment. On Indian plantations, no single union represents all laborers. Instead, unions are affiliated with political parties, so there can be a few contending unions on any one plantation. As mentioned earlier, wages are negotiated every three years in state capitals, and once instituted, unions comply until the next wage talk approaches. In the summer of 2008, before the wage talks of August 2008, the ruling political party told its union leaders to have workers enact a hunger strike for higher wages. I sat with these laborers, and for hours they asked me about how much their garden's tea costs in the United States. On this day, hunger strikes took place on every garden in Darjeeling, but they had particular resonance on this fair trade plantation. One of the effects of a recent ecotourism project on the plantation is that workers have begun to learn more about the market for tea from consumers. They know that their tea sells for $10 a cup in New York City at TSalon, a vendor that has a direct buying relationship with the plantation, but they only make $1.50 a day. "Do you pay that much for a cup of tea?" a worker asked me while sitting on hunger strike. "Just the tea? Not the milk and sugar?" a woman asked. Another man interjected, "No, only rich people can afford this tea, like the people who stay in the owner's house." It is important to note that this and other strikes were not wholly against the owner. Instead, workers saw themselves as striking against the state of West Bengal, because they saw the state as the agent who should provide for them. Attempting to diffuse the strike, the owner tried to use Joint Body meetings to discuss the union's wage complaints. After waiting, scheduled meetings, and then canceled meetings, the issues put before the Joint Body by striking workers were dropped. The wage talks proceeded later in the summer of 2008, but many pluckers doubted the efficacy of the strike. Sitting outside with a retired tea worker one afternoon, I asked her whether the hunger strikes ever had any effects. "Ahh," she said, batting her hand in the air. "[The union politicians] would rather have the owner fill their bellies.

A look at the makeup of a Joint Body helps explain the woman's cynicism. On all fair trade plantations managers served in the other office positions, and on one garden, the Joint Body "president" was the owner himself. FLO's website explains that on Makaibari Tea Estates' Joint Body, ten out of the sixteen members are women; however, this figure does not include two permanent fixtures: the owner and his wife (FLO 2005). On the Makaibari Joint Body, there were more women than men, but these women overwhelmingly came from one village, the one closest to the factory and to the owner's house. This village is also the most visible from the road, and it is where all the guests stay when they come, often as guests of members of the Joint Body. As Lyon discusses in this volume (chap. 6), the fair trade movement holds gender equality and women's issues at the forefront. FLO claims that women at Makaibari who wanted to develop ecotourism to diversify their income decided to build eco-lodges.
and develop homestays in villages so that visitors could "glean a whiff of the Makaibari mystique." I found, however, that several of the homestays were benefiting members of the Joint Body individually and that as of 2008, the only "eco-lodges" had been built by Tazo Tea's CHAI development project, with financial contribution from the villages in addition to an unspecified investment from the Joint Body. Community development was accomplished through the bolstering of a select few people in a village, nominated by the Joint Body. If anything, the Joint Body has only empowered a few of its members, who other villagers describe as "in the malik's hand." The formation of the ecotourism projects, intended as economic development, did little more than remind workers of the great distance between prices and wages.

There is little demand domestically for Darjeeling tea, since the price of the tea is much higher than the price of tea produced at larger Indian tea plantations. These plantations specialize in CTC-grade teas for drinking with milk and sugar, the preferred preparation in India. Tea from small Darjeeling plantations as well as from these large plantations in Assam, Jalpaiguri, and the Dooars, goes up for sale at the Kolkata auction. For producers, there is a degree of uncertainty regarding how much a particular lot of tea will fetch on a given week at the auction because Indian marketing companies buying the tea understandingly want to buy the best quality for the lowest price. Unlike coffee, tea is a geographically undifferentiated market. "Earl Grey" and "English Breakfast" are popular teas. These tea types can be sourced from any tea-growing region or grade. These more everyday teas, along with the teas marketed by the two most powerful buyers, Tata (Tetley) and Hindustan Unilever (Lipton), make up the bulk of the market. The Darjeeling planters I interviewed found that fair trade certification was an effective and lucrative means of reaching U.S. and other European markets without participating in the auction system.

Fair trade can shorten the commodity chain and allow plantations to trade directly with international retailers, though it is hard to say if this is beneficial for the workers whom fair trade aims to empower. Of course, tea-plantation laborers are not engaging in trade themselves. All financial arrangements go directly through owners and management. Fair trade does not address this paradox in the certification of plantations. The owner of the plantation acts as a middleman, a barrier not only to free trade but also to fair trade. Most fair-trade-certified gardens run marketing houses abroad, which market the tea to other smaller retailers such as online sellers or boutique teashops. It is difficult to ascertain how much tea a garden sells as "fair trade." In one public meeting, a community member asked a fair trade plantation owner what his average sales were. The owner claimed that his sales, both direct and at auction, averaged around Rs. 100 per kilogram. If this were the real average price, it would be absolutely impossible for the owner to run his garden. Rs. 100 per kilogram is far lower than the cost of production (between Rs. 150–200 per kilogram) and far lower than the average auction sales of the lowest grades of the worst gardens in Darjeeling. The residents of Darjeeling know this and believe that owners turn much larger profits, particularly through direct trade, but fair trade representatives have accepted the owners' low figures, even though the math does not make sense. Darjeelingers inside and outside of the tea industry continued to be suspicious of plantation owners' claims about low market prices creating a "crisis" in the industry. With the onset of fair trade and direct trade, the lack of transparency about pricing has only increased these suspicions. Direct buying relationships in Darjeeling are anything but open and transparent. Workers do not have anything to say about either the auction or direct buying, but at least the auction prices are public knowledge and made accessible by all the brokers in Kolkata. Neither of these clashing modes of regulation has made a difference to plantation laborers' quality of life. It is evident, however, that direct buying is causing more problems that it is solving.

Environmental Development and Human Sustainability

The environmental situation is less acute than the social or economic one, but a lack of transparent concern from either the Indian state or FLO is creating a slower, silent crisis. Neither the colonial nor the neoliberal mode of regulation has effectively dealt with environmental issues. Indian land-reform laws protect the forests within the plantations. This prevents owners from logging their own forests to provide firewood, one of the rations mandated by labor law. This limitation on logging, while protecting the forests, theoretically forces owners to buy firewood from other sources. However, in the research site the legislation seems to be having little impact as owners continue to cut down trees to provide firewood for their employees. There are few other state-driven environmental regulations for plantations. Although the colonial system comes short of promoting environmental sustainability, fair trade's emphasis on a division between the "natural" and the "human" environment, coupled with its philosophical emphasis on individual empowerment, has also limited its success in environmental development.
FLO emphasizes sustainability of the "natural" and "human" environments in its standards for environmental development. For the "natural" environment, fair trade environmental standards focus on environmental protection, sustainable farm inputs, reforestation, and reducing soil erosion. Tea has long been a monocrop in Darjeeling. The hillsides of Darjeeling are clear-cut slopes covered in rows of neatly planted tea bushes, often one hundred years old. Fair trade standards include a long prohibited-substances list, which prohibits the use of chemical pesticides and pushes producers toward organic and sustainable production. Unlike in the case of banana farms in the Caribbean (see Moberg, chap. 3, this volume), this environmental hurdle to fair trade certification was not difficult to surmount, because all Darjeeling fair trade gardens were certified organic before becoming certified fair trade. Most continue to operate without chemicals; however, some have had to revert to conventional production, citing the production costs as too high.

According to FLO, whenever possible, producers should use renewable energy. In Darjeeling, the processing machines and plucking methods are the same ones used in the 1850s and 1860s. Coal is the primary input in Darjeeling tea production, and it takes three kilograms of coal to process one kilogram of tea. Darjeeling plantations process nine to ten tons of tea a year, which means they spend twenty-seven to thirty tons of coal each year in a very small area. However, in this regard FLO standards have done little to lessen the environmental impact of tea processing in Darjeeling.

Although coal is a dangerous and unsustainable energy source, and although pesticide use has dropped in Darjeeling, few workers I interviewed expressed serious concerns about these "natural" environment issues. Instead, they discussed persistent problems with their everyday environment, problems that neither fair trade nor the fading colonial system had managed to solve. For example, even though several generations of workers have lived on the plantation, workers have no control over the land on which they live. Workers live in villages within the plantation. They do not own the land that their houses sit on, and while some have title to their houses, others live in fear that the owners could repossess them. A lack of land ownership is a serious obstacle to empowerment. For the workers I interviewed, land and land tenure were the central "environmental" problems they faced.

Since the villages have grown far beyond capacity in the past 150 years and lands are very rarely allotted for new settlements, there is little opportunity for subsistence farming on the plantation. In terms of food security, fair trade discourse resonates with free trade and neoliberal logic, highlighting that with the revenues from the fair trade social premium, assistance somehow makes it to where it is needed most. Food security remains an overlooked aspect of fair trade agricultural studies. Darjeeling plantation owners justified a lack of family or community garden space by explaining that the forests, protected by Indian land-reform law, are rich in wild vegetables. People are afraid of the forests because for the past ten years, the owner has bred leopards within them. The presence of wildlife in the plantation satisfies FLO's goal of "environmental protection," but fearful workers must buy all their food from small stores on the plantation or at the market at least an hour's walk uphill. At Rs. 58 a day, a worker can afford very little in the way of vegetables and quality grains or meats. Plantation stores often carry only low-quality white rice, flour, potatoes, oil, and sugar. After older residents went to doctors, even hospitals sponsored by NGOs, for treatment of "pressure problems," "sugar problems," or full-blown diabetes, they were told to eat less sugar. Over a meal of potatoes and rice, a female tea plucker with adult-onset diabetes told me that given the constraints of their purchasing power, this is practically very difficult.

Food rations on Darjeeling plantations, mandated by the Labor Act, provide four kilograms of flour and two kilograms of rice per worker every fifteen days. This potentially would last a single worker over a fifteen-day period, but it is not adequate to meet the needs of the extended family members each worker supports. Though this is inadequate, at least the Indian labor law addresses the problem of food security, even though these starches are contributing to the aforementioned silent health epidemics. Fair trade certifiers seem satisfied with the idea of workers purchasing food with their newfound wealth. In congruence with neoliberal policies, fair trade chooses to leave food security issues up to individuals. FLO implicitly assumes that through "democratically elected bodies," fair trade revenue will somehow be distributed where it is needed most. The lack of land tenure, food security alternatives, and purchasing options is creating a slow-moving "human" environmental crisis on fair trade plantations, one that FLO's failure to guarantee economic and social development is only exaggerating.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have argued that Darjeeling tea-plantation owners are co-opting fair trade and using it to solve postcolonial demand problems and get their tea to market at high prices. The neoliberal aspects of fair
trade, namely, the removal of trade barriers, are helping owners compete more effectively; however, in order for a regime of accumulation to succeed, all people must ideologically buy into the system. Darjeeling workers are not ideologically entrenched in trade. Workers seeking better wages and guarantees of social welfare are still turning to the welfare model developed during the colonial regime of accumulation. They are not petitioning civil society organizations to improve labor conditions; they are striking against owners and the state. Workers are not only more ideologically tied to the old system; they are nostalgic for it. Recall the vignette with which I opened this chapter. Over white rice, potatoes, and watery lentil soup, we discussed the role of the Joint Body and the endemic corruption on the plantation. Again, the old woman crouched in the corner, without lifting her eyes from her plate, said, “The British time was better.” Town residents and tea workers alike expressed this opinion. Darjeelingers frequently told me that things worked better under colonialism. A Darjeeling schoolteacher even said to me, “I wish that they would just take us over again . . . . We did not have this corruption during the Britishers’ time.” For tea laborers, the colonial regime represented a time when tea production was stable and the labor conditions were favorable.

In Darjeeling, the implementation of FLO standards has benefited owners, not workers. Although my work in Darjeeling does not lead me to think that the benefits of fair trade should never be extended to plantations, I do think that fair trade standards should reflect that plantations are hierarchical. This hierarchical structure makes it impossible for resources to be managed “jointly.” Instead, FLO must privilege workers and take measures to prevent owners from manipulating the system for their own benefit. A quick comparison between a fair trade plantation and a conventional one is instructive. During my 2006–2009 fieldwork, I also spent time at Goodricke Company tea plantations in Darjeeling, as well as cinchona plantations across the district. Workers had expansive gardens and ample water supply, active labor unions, food rations, excellent medical facilities, and good housing, all of which are provided to them by plantation management; however, none of the Goodricke tea gardens and cinchona plantations are certified as fair trade. In fact, workers and managers I interviewed were not at all interested in pursuing certification.

As Fridell (2007) points out, fair trade, as both a movement and a market, extends the neoliberal economic emphasis on nongovernmental regulation and individual empowerment but also challenges the disenfranchisement that such policies cause. I have tried to use a regulation approach to show how neoliberalization reorients the state toward trade at the expense of social justice and how fair trade tries to correct this. When the Darjeeling tea plantations began seeking certification in the late 1990s, Northern consumers’ enthusiasm for “socially conscious” products combined with plantation owners’ desires to cut costs have inspired Darjeeling gardens to turn to fair trade certification, which has in turn overrun established state apparatuses for regulating workers’ welfare. Focusing on modes of regulation in fair trade agriculture should help scholars studying fair trade in other regions shift their scale of analysis to explore the role of state and nonprofit regulatory institutions in protecting workers’ rights. One possible avenue for improvement is an expansion of FLO and other organizations’ understanding of local legal codes and labor histories, something that social scientists are uniquely positioned to provide.

NOTES

1. This research was supported by a Fullbright Hays Fellowship, an American Institute for Indian Studies Junior Fellowship, and a Scott Kloeck Jenson grant from the Center for Global Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

2. There are five fair-trade-certified producers in Darjeeling: Chamon group, Amboota group, Tea Promoters of India (TPI), and Makalbari Tea Estate. Each of these, except Makalbari, is a conglomerate. Between them, Chamon, Amboota, and TPI own over thirty of the eighty-seven gardens of Darjeeling. Makalbari, certified in 1994, is a single estate and heralded by FLO as a model fair trade project (FLO 2005). It became the first plantation of any kind certified by FLO. Over the past fifteen years, many more plantations have become certified. I do not intend this chapter to be an expose of the practices of Darjeeling plantations, but instead I aim to highlight the difficulties of applying fair trade in hired-labor situations.

3. Change is afoot in Darjeeling. At the time of publication, I am completing research on a separate state movement that heralds the causes of plantation workers’ rights and reform in the Darjeeling tea industry.

4. This chapter is based on twelve months of research in Darjeeling (February 2008–January 2009). In Darjeeling, I studied on several fair trade gardens, owned by each of the aforementioned companies. I also worked with the Nepali-speaking laborers on conventional tea plantations as well as cinchona plantations across the district. I collected data through participant observation, informal conversations, and semistructured interviews with tea workers while plucking tea and working in the fields as well as in domestic settings. From my first trips to Darjeeling in 2005 to 2009, I was able to witness how attitudes toward fair trade certification changed among Darjeeling tea planters.

5. CHAI works on several plantations in the Darjeeling district, both fair trade certified and conventional.
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Part II

Negotiating Difference and Identity in Fair Trade Markets

In addition to redefining producer-consumer relationships, fair trade's certification standards have prioritized gender equity, the maintenance of local cultural traditions, and democratic participation within producer groups. The three case studies composing this section critically examine the extent to which such standards are implemented among fair trade groups producing coffee, tea, and crafts for the global market. Sarah Lyon's study of a Maya fair trade coffee cooperative in Guatemala raises questions about the effectiveness of these initiatives, at least where gender is considered. Rather than participating in coffee production and the male-dominated cooperative sphere, female cooperative members are eager to find a foreign market for their weavings in order to increase their own earnings. Despite verbal support for a women's weaving project among co-op members, the fair trade group has not actively assisted women in their efforts to seek a foreign buyer, nor has it incorporated women into positions of leadership or decision-making. Notwithstanding the movement's rhetorical commitment to equal participation, its failure to promote women's interests in practice is acutely felt in rural Guatemala, where women are disproportionately indentured, unemployed, and illiterate while often suffering from high levels of personal violence.

With respect to Kenyan tea production, Catherine Dolan similarly notes a disparity between fair trade's rhetorical endorsement of gender equity and its inability to accomplish these goals in practice. She argues that local gender imbalances are related less to inequities in transnational commodity chains than to the fabric of communities cross-cut by longstanding social hierarchies, gendered conventions, and rigid divisions of labor, all of which deflect fair trade's goals of redistributive justice. With regard to decision-making in producers' associations, Dolan finds that fair trade tea growers in Kenya enjoy little discretion over the ways in which social premiums are invested, a fact that vitiates the movement's principles of democratic participation. Here, as well, women are largely absent from the meager involvement that does occur within fair trade producers' groups.