

International Coffee Trade in Solidarity with the Zapatista Rebellion: Anthropological Perspectives on Commercial Ethics within Political Antagonistic Movements

Authors : Miria Gambardella

Abstract : The influence of solidarity demonstrations towards the Zapatista National Liberation Army has been constantly present over the years, both locally and internationally, guaranteeing visibility to the cause, shaping the movement's choices, and influencing its hopes of impact worldwide. Most of the coffee produced by the autonomous cooperatives from Chiapas is exported, therefore making coffee trade the main income from international solidarity networks. The question arises about the implications of the relations established between the communities in resistance in Southeastern Mexico and international solidarity movements, specifically on the strategies adopted to conciliate army's demands for autonomy and economic asymmetries between Zapatista cooperatives producing coffee and European collectives who hold purchasing power. In order to deepen the inquiry on those topics, a year-long multi-site investigation was carried out. The first six months of fieldwork were based in Barcelona, where Zapatista coffee was first traded in Spain and where one of the historical and most important European solidarity groups can be found. The last six months of fieldwork were carried out directly in Chiapas, in contact with coffee producers, Zapatista political authorities, international activists as well as vendors, and the rest of the network implicated in coffee production, roasting, and sale. The investigation was based on qualitative research methods, including participatory observation, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews. The analysis did not only focus on retracing the steps of the market chain as if it could be considered a linear and unilateral process, but it rather aimed at exploring actors' reciprocal perceptions, roles, and dynamics of power. Demonstrations of solidarity and the money circulation they imply aim at changing the system in place and building alternatives, among other things, on the economic level. This work analyzes the formulation of discourse and the organization of solidarity activities that aim at building opportunities for action within a highly politicized economic sphere to which access must be regularly legitimized. The meaning conveyed by coffee is constructed on a symbolic level by the attribution of moral criteria to transactions. The latter participate in the construction of imaginaries that circulate through solidarity movements with the Zapatista rebellion. Commercial exchanges linked to solidarity networks turned out to represent much more than monetary transactions. The social, cultural, and political spheres are invested by ethics, which penetrates all aspects of militant action. It is at this level that the boundaries of different collective actors connect, contaminating each other: merely following the money flow would have been limiting in order to account for a reality within which imaginary is one of the main currencies. The notions of "trust", "dignity" and "reciprocity" are repeatedly mobilized to negotiate discontinuous and multidirectional flows in the attempt to balance and justify commercial relations in a politicized context that characterizes its own identity through demonizing "market economy" and its dehumanizing powers.

Keywords : coffee trade, economic anthropology, international cooperation, Zapatista National Liberation Army

Conference Title : ICAAPD 2022 : International Conference on Applied Anthropology and Participatory Development

Conference Location : Venice, Italy

Conference Dates : November 10-11, 2022