EMPIRE AND SOLIDARITY IN THE AMERICAS CONFERENCE

Solidarity and Consumption

Lindy C. Boggs Conference Center
Room 256

October 16 & 17, 2009
The 2009 Empire and Solidarity in the Americas Conference explores the past and present of consumer-based activism within the Americas. Since the nineteenth century, activists have developed strategies that attempted to use markets in different ways to address a range of social justice issues. In the late twentieth century, consumption has become a key arena for Latin American solidarity activists. This political move by activists to focus on the market as an arena for generating change has become particularly salient under neoliberalism and warrants ongoing investigation and reflection. In different ways, the fair trade movement, as well as campaigns targeting particular products, corporations, industries, or countries, have attempted to use consumption in campaigns to reduce poverty and inequality, challenge labor and human rights abuses, improve environmental practices, support worker organizing, and support popular organizations in Latin America, as well as educate northern consumers and challenge the global system of “free” trade. Can an inherently exploitative/unequal process – the northern consumption of southern commodities – also be a meaningful arena for international solidarity? How has the decision (or threat) to consume or not consume particular products in the United States been utilized as a form of solidarity with working people in Latin America? How have campaigns been used to pressure companies or industries to respect human and worker rights? What are the limitations, contradictions, successes, failures, and futures of consumption as an arena for solidarity between the North and South?

The conference organizers, Steve Striffler (UNO, Latin American Studies) and Aviva Chomsky (Salem State, History) thank the University of New Orleans, Salem State College, and the Doris Zemurray Stone Chair in Latin American Studies for sponsoring this conference.

---

Friday, October 16th, 3:30 – 6:00 p.m.

Session One:

EMPIRE AND SOLIDARITY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS AT ZAMORANO: THE UNITED FRUIT COMPANY, AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION, AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Walter Stern, Graduate Student, Tulane University

The United Fruit Company (UFCO) opened La Escuela Agrícola Panamericana, or Zamorano, in 1942 to provide advanced agricultural training to students from across Latin America. UFCO President Samuel Zemurray believed the school, which still exists today, would be good for business and the region as graduates applied their newly acquired skills toward the economic development of their home countries. Zamorano’s continued commitment to the promotion of business and the betterment of Latin America raises intriguing questions about the nature of the United States’ economic relationship with Latin America. While many of the school’s 6,000 graduates hold high-level positions with the businesses, banks, and governmental agencies central to the northern consumption of southern commodities, still others work to promote environmental and social justice agendas, often from within the free-market system. As a site of negotiation between these diverse interests, the school illuminates the complexities inherent in the north-south flow of people, products, and ideas.

COMPANIES, BOYCotts, AND SOLIDARITY:
FROM THE FARMWORKERS TO THE MAQUILADORAS

Aviva Chomsky, Professor of History and Coordinator of Latin American Studies, Salem State College

Steve Striffler, Professor of Latin American Studies and Anthropology, The University of New Orleans

Popular organizations have called for boycotts, and supporters have promoted and observed boycotts, for multiple reasons. Boycotts have attempted to pressure individual companies to change policies, stop abuses, or adopt codes of conduct, either through directly affecting their profits, or by tarnishing their public image. They have attempted to educate the public about specific corporate abuses in order to build momentum for change at the state level, either by persuading Latin American governments to enforce labor laws and hold companies legally accountable, or by demanding that international governments apply pressure on both corporations and Latin American states. This paper looks at four moments in the history of company-focused activism: the United Farmworkers and the grape boycott, the exposés of ITT in the Chile solidarity movement, the Guatemala Coke boycott, and the maquiladora campaigns, to examine the different ways that activists on both sides of the borders have attempted to empower workers, stop human rights abuses, educate consumers, and influence the policies and actions of corporations and states.
Session Two:

FAIR TRADE: SOLIDARITY THROUGH CONSUMPTION?

FAIRNESS FOR WHOM? REGULATING LABOR THROUGH VOLUNTARY CERTIFICATION AND LABELING

Sandy Brown, Doctoral Candidate, UC-Berkeley, Geography

This paper takes as its point of departure a central problematic of the Fair Trade system, namely that while Fair Trade’s purported goal is to improve conditions at the point of production, it attempts to do so through mediation of the exchange realm. By side-stepping production relations, Fair Trade actors ignore critical structural realities of production organized around the wage labor relation. Drawing on interviews with small cooperative farmers, farmworkers, agricultural technicians, and labor leaders, I explore the role of this voluntary, consumption-based mode of governance in regulating labor relations in Ecuador’s southern coastal banana region, where hired labor is central at virtually all production scales. The research suggests that, on small farms, hired laborers do not share in the benefits of Fair Trade in any formalized way. Furthermore, the farmers who are not structurally dependent on outside labor (and therefore operate most closely to the Fair Trade ideal) are most at risk of losing market access, due to the quality and quantity demands of Fair Trade importers and retailers. In terms of plantation production, initial research suggests that certification has failed to open up new possibilities for workers’ collective action and may, in fact, produce barriers to union organization.

"DANCING WITH THE DEVIL? THE POTENTIAL AND PERILS OF FAIR TRADE IN THE AMERICAS"

Daniel Jaffee, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Washington State University

This paper examines the fraught politics of the rapidly growing fair trade market and the social movement that generated it. Fair trade emerged in its current form in the late 1980s, with substantial impetus from solidarity movements on the political Left, in response to the deeply inequitable terms of trade for small commodity producers in the global South. The aim was to create alternative trading structures to link peasant farmers more directly with Northern consumers, freeing up capital for higher and fairer prices. Mexico produced the first fairly-traded coffee, and today Latin America is the biggest producer of fair trade certified goods. However, while the movement’s strategy of market mainstreaming has led to dramatic growth, it has also drawn the participation of the largest corporate agrofood firms (including Nestle, Procter & Gamble, Coca-Cola, and Dole) and opened the door to certification of agribusiness plantations in a wide range of crops. Critics charge that corporate participation has watered down fair trade standards and coopted the movement’s foundational principles. The paper assesses the risks and possibilities of fair trade at the present moment, and its prospects in the future, for small producers and social movements in the Americas.

Saturday, October 17th, 12:30 - 2:30 p.m.

Session Three:

GLOBAL STRATEGIES: CONSUMERS, THE STATE, AND LABOR RIGHTS

COMBINING PUBLIC AND PRIVATE MEASURES OF SOCIAL COMPLIANCE?

Hank Frundt, Professor of Sociology, Ramapo College

To achieve solidarity with southern commodity producers, in addition to supporting individual campaigns, northern activists have advocated two macro approaches: trade conditionality and third-party-monitored ethical codes. This paper assesses the potentiality of their combination. Trade Office review of labor rights under the U.S. Generalized System of Preferences has given way to multilateral mechanisms. For example, the NAFTA labor accord allows ministerial consultations regarding child labor and health/safety violations of national laws (CAFTA contains even weaker mechanisms). On the other hand, Fair Trade labeling has competitively strengthened ethical sourcing by offering consumer choices beyond corporate code approbation like SA8000 and the Rainforest Alliance frog. Nevertheless, there are economic and social limitations to such private approaches. They only offer periodic assessments; they do not fully resolve labor representation; they are subject to both image and market manipulation (even more so in an economic downturn), and they may discourage local legal enforcement. The paper then considers whether limited multilateral public trade regulation may be able to overcome some of these drawbacks.

"SLENDER THREADS: LABOR RIGHTS, CONSUMER BOYCOTTS, AND GLOBAL STRATEGIES"

Gay Seidman, Professor of Sociology, University of Wisconsin-Madison

This paper draws on contemporary social movement theories to question some of the underlying assumptions of consumer-based transnational strategies, drawing on examples from southern Africa and Latin America. While consumer-based strategies have certainly raised global awareness of labor issues, the paper raises questions about the limitations of the approach.
Session Four:
NEW ORLEANS RESTAURANTS, SOLIDARITY, AND WORKPLACE JUSTICE

RESTAURANT OPPORTUNITIES CENTER OF NEW ORLEANS

Members and coordinators of the Restaurant Opportunities Center of New Orleans will talk about solidarity with restaurant workers in New Orleans, many of whom are immigrants from Latin America.