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 America 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?

Invited Participants Include:

Sandy Brown, doctoral candidate in Geography, University of California-Berkeley, is currently conducting research on Ecuador’s Fair Trade banana industry.


Dana Frank, Professor of History and Director of the Center for Labor Studies, University of California, Santa Cruz, and author of Bananeras: Women Transforming the Banana Unions of Latin America.

Henry Frundt, Professor of Sociology, Ramapo College, and author of Fair Bananans: Farmers, Workers, and Consumers Strive to Change an Industry.

Lesley Gill, Professor and Chair, Department of Anthropology, Vanderbilt University, and author of The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas.

Daniel Jaffe, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Washington State University, and author of Brewing Justice: Fair Trade Coffee, Sustainability and Survival.

Gay Seidman, Professor of Sociology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and author of Beyond the Boycott: Labor Rights, Human Rights and Transnational Activism.

Walter Stern, graduate student in history, Tulane University, is conducting research on the United Fruit Company.

Steve Striffler, Professor of Latin American Studies and Anthropology, The University of New Orleans, and author of Chicken: The Dangerous Transformation of America’s Favorite Food.

Conference is Open to Public. Papers will be distributed prior to conference. For papers, please contact Steve Striffler (striffler@hotmail.com).