

GUILTY PLEASURES?

Global Commodities in Social Context

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Fair Bananas! Farmers, Workers, and Consumers Strive to Change an Industry. By Henry J. Frundt. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009. Pp. xvii + 273. \$65.00 cloth, \$26.95 paper.

Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World. By Marcy Norton. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008. Pp. xiv + 334. \$35.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

Caribbean Rum: A Social and Economic History. By Frederick H. Smith. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005. Pp. xvi + 339. \$59.95 cloth. \$29.95 paper.

The Banana: Empires, Trade Wars, and Globalization. By James Wiley. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. Pp. xxv + 278. \$49.50 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

The past thirty years have seen an increasing number of analyses of the economic, political, and social ramifications of international commodity production and trade. Social and economic histories of specific agricultural commodities—such as Sidney Mintz’s seminal work *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (1985)—have proved useful for exploring the ways the production, trade, and consumption of agricultural commodities have shaped, and continue to shape, both producing and consuming societies. Similarly, analyses of commodity chains, what George Marcus has called the “follow the thing” approach, have also placed commodities in the spotlight as a way to understand processes of globalization and the interrelationship of global and local systems.¹

Commodity-based studies have ranged widely in focus, from goods important in colonial and early postcolonial times, such as sugar and coffee, to the agricultural commodities—cut flowers, tomatoes, and cocaine—circulating in global markets today.² Such studies have shown

1. George Marcus, “Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 102.

2. See, for example, Stephen Topik, Carlos Marichal, and Zephyr Frank, *From Silver to Cocaine: Latin American Chains and the Building of the World Economy, 1500–2000* (Durham, NC:

that, although agricultural commodities have provided a livelihood to millions of small producers and revenue for struggling national economies, structural inequities and injustices in the global economy have often wreaked havoc on farming families and national economies throughout Latin America, thereby prompting a growing alternative trade movement to address such inequities.

The four books under review build on these traditions, adding to the understanding of the economic and political relationships inherent in transatlantic commodity chains and the sociocultural contexts in which the values and meanings of commodities are constructed. The emphasis given to consumption, production, and trade varies in each of these works. Marcy Norton focuses almost exclusively on the consumption of chocolate and tobacco on both sides of the Atlantic, whereas James Wiley's analysis of the banana industry revolves around production and trade, with little account of consumption practices. Henry Frundt and Frederick Smith both integrate, to varying degrees, aspects of production, consumption, and trade in their analyses of bananas and rum, respectively. All four works, in various ways, examine the role of agency and document the complex, iterative processes involved in the creation and re-creation of social and cultural—and hence economic—values as agricultural goods circulate in the realm of global commodities.

Norton and Smith both use a primarily historical approach to study how commodities acquire social and economic meanings. The historian Norton interprets the spread of two of the most important pre-Columbian agricultural goods—tobacco and cacao—throughout the Spanish empire, whereas Smith, an anthropologist, examines the production and consumption of rum in terms of both the larger political economy of the Caribbean and the more particular sociocultural systems of its various populations.

In her meticulously researched book, Norton provides an interesting account of the sociocultural factors underlying the spread of chocolate and tobacco into European society. Norton rejects prevailing arguments that attribute the assimilation of chocolate and tobacco into European societies either to the physiologically addictive nature of these substances or to gradual cultural transformations, which rendered these substances both “materially and symbolically” palatable to European tastes (7–8). Instead, she argues that the spread of these “pagan” and “barbaric” goods, and the rising demand for them, were not simply the result of overcoming pre-Columbian cultural meanings associated with their use but that their acceptance was the result of an inevitable syncretic process: “Europeans did not welcome tobacco and chocolate in spite of the meanings that

Duke University Press, 2006); Gabriel Torres, *The Force of Irony: Power in the Everyday Life of Mexican Tomato Workers* (New York: Berg, 1997); Catherine Ziegler, *Favored Flowers: Culture and Economy in a Global System* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

Indians attributed to them, but often *because* of them. New tastes emerged out of the social matrix created of Atlantic Empires" (9).

Drawing on an analysis of scholarly texts of the period, she points out that the spread of cacao and tobacco to the Old World involved not just the transportation and consumption of the goods themselves but also the transference of systems of knowledge related to various sociocultural uses and perceptions regarding qualities inherent in the goods. On both levels, she argues, "the process of incorporation was dialectical rather than one-sided" (128).

Norton finds that tobacco and chocolate, compared to other Old World substances, barely figured in the inventories of Old World apothecaries before the seventeenth century. Instead, most of the earlier imports to Europe (mainly Spain) can be attributed to church clergy and merchants in Andalusia who, having developed a taste for tobacco and cacao in their dealings in the New World, brought back small quantities for personal consumption. Elite merchants in particular played a role in stimulating demand by creating "communities of users" who reinforced and legitimized the consumption of cacao and tobacco (144), not as medicinal goods transformed to meet European cultural norms and ideologies but as recreational and social goods whose use and meaning more closely resembled pre-Columbian systems and practices.³

For example, according to Norton, the sociability associated with smoking tobacco in New World indigenous societies became a hallmark of its use in the Old World as well. Disseminated in large part throughout Europe through networks of merchant seamen who had frequented the New World, the social ritual of smoking tobacco was available to all social classes and helped foster the rise in its use. Old World consumption of chocolate, in contrast, began among the elite. As in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, chocolate consumption became a sign of elite status in the Old World. As other classes began to emulate elite practices, demand increased, and by the second decade of the seventeenth century, chocolate was widely imported for sale as a commodity. It was only when profitability increased that European states and private merchants both attempted to monopolize trade.

Although Norton emphasizes the syncretic processes that facilitated the spread of chocolate and tobacco throughout the Atlantic world, she recognizes that these processes were not always seamless and were strongly contested. The church in particular was concerned with defin-

3. Although Norton dismisses the thesis that chocolate and tobacco were originally seen primarily as medicinal goods, only later to be transformed into recreational and social consumer goods, her in-depth discussion of early debates among physicians and scholars as to the properties and uses of these substances suggests that there remains some merit to that argument.

ing and maintaining “the boundaries separating Christian and idolatrous, European and Amerindian, and civilized and barbarian” (129). But Christianized Mesoamerican populations frequently incorporated cacao and tobacco—known to be used in pre-Columbian sacred rituals—into ritual practices, thus blurring the aforesaid boundaries and challenging church authority. It was not just indigenous use that caused consternation and confusion. Many New World Spanish Creoles became aficionados of tobacco and/or chocolate before the general acceptance of these items in European society. According to Norton, the consumption of chocolate and tobacco created something of an identity crisis, as Creoles tried to reconcile the “idolatrous” and “pagan” origins of these goods with the pleasures and beneficial effects that they had come to appreciate (133).

Smith likewise uses a historical approach to study the production and consumption of rum in the Caribbean. Norton focuses primarily on consumption alone, whereas Smith attempts to interweave this with an analysis of the technologies of production, colonial politics, and sugar economies in the region. Poor organization and frequent repetition often undermine this more ambitious goal, yet Smith’s attention to the social and symbolic meanings that commodities had for the “slaves, servants, peasants, and planters who produced them” (2) brings, as does Norton’s work, a new dimension to commodity-based studies.

As a by-product of a crop (sugarcane) that European powers imported to America, rum was intricately connected to the colonial systems of sugar trade and production that, until the nineteenth century, relied on the labor of African slaves and, to an extent, indentured Europeans. As the profitability of sugar production dropped with the abolition of slavery and falling prices in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Caribbean planters struggled to increase their income through by-products such as molasses and increasing quantities of rum. Yet rum faced a great deal of competition from European alcoholic beverages, even as protective policies restricted the trade in alcoholic beverages in the Atlantic world. Smith argues that the resulting difficulty in obtaining other types of alcoholic beverages in the Caribbean meant that members of all socioeconomic classes looking to imbibe had little choice but to consume rum.

The consumption of alcoholic beverages was not new to any of the various ethnic groups living throughout the Caribbean at the time. Alcoholic beverages played a large role in several Carib ceremonies and in marking social hierarchies, and seventeenth-century colonists turned to the Caribs to obtain them. Declining indigenous populations, technological advances, and an increase in demand in Britain helped stimulate early rum-making efforts among British colonists in the Caribbean.

Much of Smith’s study focuses on rum consumption in African slave, colonial, and Creole populations. He argues not only that the sacred nature of alcohol and its widespread use in African societies stimulated

demand for Caribbean rum in Africa but also that rum consumption in the Caribbean “combined the social and sacred alcohol-based traditions of diverse African ethnic groups . . . [and] helped foster slave spirituality and promote group identity” (95). Although Smith devotes much attention to (and perhaps overemphasizes) alcohol’s sacred nature and the role that drinking rum played as a bridge to the spiritual world among African slaves, he also addresses its medicinal and social uses among other groups, observing that it provided a “means of physical escape from the many anxieties encountered in the Caribbean” (167). Thus, according to Smith, despite wide variations in rum-drinking styles and rituals (including temperance) among colonial and Creole elites, indentured European servants and poor white classes, and African slaves, rum consumption became a symbol of a common Caribbean identity.

Today, rum production and consumption continues to play important economic and cultural roles in Caribbean societies, although large multinational corporations control much of the industry (and thus profit). Rum consumption, both sacred and profane, remains an integral part of Caribbean culture and has become one of “the most prominent symbols of Caribbean identity” (246). According to Smith, not only have Caribbean migrant communities embraced “the symbolic meaning of rum . . . to strengthen cultural and national identity abroad” (247); this same symbol of Caribbean identity is used as a marketing device to attract tourists to the region and to promote economic development. In concluding, Smith notes that perhaps there are underlying costs to this symbol of identity. Although, in general, alcohol consumption rates remain “below those of the U.S, Britain, and France” (237), alcohol-related social and health problems are on the rise in many Caribbean societies.

The other two books under review examine aspects of the international trade in bananas today. Wiley analyzes banana trade wars in relation to globalization, whereas Frundt takes a multiactor approach to fair-trade initiatives and how alliances among consumers, producers, and workers can emerge despite often-conflicting notions of what is truly fair in fair trade.

Wiley provides both a detailed history of the development of major trade networks in the global banana industry and an analysis of the role that these networks play in its structure. He argues that the intensity of the banana wars of 1993–2001—the U.S.-led trade dispute with the European Union—was the result of globalization, as the spread of neoliberal ideologies and policies threatened “the continuity of many long-term trading relationships, often neo-colonial in nature, between developed countries and LDCs [less developed countries] that focused on primary sector commodities” (xix).

At the heart of this dispute is competition between African, Caribbean, and Pacific producers, on the one hand, and Latin American producers, on

the other, for access to the lucrative EU market. Colonial relations shaped the different development of the industry in these regions, and hence the options and strategies available to various stakeholders. As with most international commodity networks, transnational corporations control shipping and export in both regions, although, Wiley points out, the relationship of these corporations to producing countries, the institutional frameworks in which they operate, and the systems for producing the bananas they buy vary considerably from region to region. For example, the plantation model found throughout most of Latin America was instituted primarily by the notorious United Fruit Company, which was able to control both production and export by operating in "splendid isolation" (23), that is, with little interference from, or accountability to, local governments. Other players, such as Belize and Suriname, have relied to a great extent on state-run plantations involving tenant labor. Elsewhere, nonplantation models have dominated: in the eastern Caribbean, small, independent farmers undertake banana production, and in the French West Indies, medium-scale farmers prevail. According to Wiley, although "the scale and economic relationships that characterize each industry" are factors in how well farmers, as well as transnational corporations, have fared, in the end all are profoundly affected by decisions made by international trade organizations (121–122).

The second half of Wiley's book is devoted to a closer examination of the roles of these diverse models in the recent EU-U.S. banana dispute and of international trade agreements and bodies such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) in the attempt to resolve it. Essentially, Wiley argues, the dispute pitted the rights and obligations of long-term trading relationships (EU position) against globally emergent norms of neoliberal free trade (U.S. position). He raises some interesting points about the implications of the globalization of the banana industry for the future of less developed countries in general, for the role of agriculture in competitive markets in particular, and for the efficacy of international trade organizations in fairly mediating disputes. Still, the book falls short of its potential in some respects. For example, it concludes that the resolution of the banana dispute "reaffirmed the most essential reality of the world economy since the early colonial era: the virtual impossibility of successfully challenging the global economic power structure" (245). Yet Wiley's analysis indicates that there does not seem to be a single "global economic power structure," but instead several, and that institutional reform is itself influenced and modified by diverse interest groups holding different positions in the commodity chain, as Frundt also points out (below). The multiplicity of interests in, and responses to, both the dispute and the 2001 ruling, which favored a more open market structure, suggests that more forces were at work than neoliberal economics. As well, the dispute is not over. Wiley notes that a changing international framework and new obligations

for competitiveness have prompted varied reactions among transnational banana corporations, banana-producing nations, and farmers throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

Whereas Wiley focuses on the development of the structural forces that have shaped the international banana industry, Frundt focuses on the actors in this framework to examine whether the emerging fair-trade movement can possibly meet the expectations of small-scale producers, wage laborers, and consumers alike. Frundt points out that fair trade faces new challenges to a coalition among stakeholders because of recent policy changes to include not only the promotion of fair and stable prices for smallholder producers but the concerns of banana workers as well.

At the core of Frundt's analysis are definitions of fairness. He contends that though these vary among different interest groups in the commodity chain, "the groups articulating them have the *potential* for coalescing around a set of principles" to challenge standard neoliberal structures of production and trade (5, my emphasis). How such geographically and economically disparate interest groups can overcome their differences to act collectively is the fundamental question of Frundt's book. He asks "whether a farmer-worker-consumer alliance can rally to promote a Fair Trade label in the banana sector as a stamp that conveys both consumer commitment and the achievement of healthy livelihoods for growers" (11).

Drawing on new social movement theory, Frundt focuses on smallholder farmers, paid laborers in large plantations and packing plants, regional labor-union leaders, and nongovernmental organization activists (presumably as representatives of consumers) to understand "how individual participants see and define themselves, and how shared meanings emerge in social movements" (57). Although smallholder farmers and workers have often been at odds as to what is fair in fair trade, Frundt shows how changes (like those Wiley describes) to the European regime in 2006 prompted labor unions and farmer organizations to collaborate with consumer advocates such as the European Banana Action Network (EUROBAN) to lobby for a multistakeholder forum to address the disproportionate power of both banana-producing corporations and supermarkets. It remains to be seen whether this results in concrete changes, but Frundt concludes that structural opportunities in the industry facilitated this workable, if fragile, alliance of farmers, workers, and consumers. He observes: "Fair Trade offered an especially persuasive identity for fairness . . . [even though] partners warned that Fair Trade must guard this identity from being subverted by insufficient consultation (and non-union bananas)" (206).

Frundt presents an interesting approach to understanding commodity networks in general, and the efficacy and sustainability of fair-trade networks in particular. Although his argument is normative—in that Frundt obviously believes in, and consciously focuses on, the possibilities of

unified action to achieve the goals of fair trade—he raises some interesting questions in regard to the creation and institutionalization of competing measures of value, consensus building, and collective action. These challenges—how to negotiate and accommodate the needs of disparate groups in international commodity chains—are faced not only by the fair-trade movement but also by national governments and conventional international trade organizations. It remains to be seen whether the fair-trade movement can do a better job of accommodating disparate interests and tempering unequal power relations inherent in international commodity production.

Few among us have not at least occasionally enjoyed the pleasures of globally traded commodities. Like coffee and sugar, products such as tobacco, chocolate, rum, and bananas have changed the face of societies throughout the Atlantic world and beyond. The four studies under review demonstrate how trade networks, social rituals and uses, and understandings of value are all constructed through historical relationships driven by diverse needs and cultural perceptions that vary across geographic and social spaces. The diverse analytical perspectives evident in these and the increasing number of commodity-based studies are a strength of this body of literature. Not only are such studies important vehicles for examining the structures and impacts of international trade from one end of the commodity chain to the other, but also many highlight the role of agency in the continual reshaping of these structures: as consumers incorporate new tastes or respond to the moral dilemmas of doing so; as powerful interests, such as transnational corporations or the WTO, control the agendas of trade; as coalitions of producers, workers, and consumers strive to challenge these interests. One might question whether we, as consumers, should (for moral or health reasons) feel guilty about our choices of consumption. For good or bad, consumers continue to demand the pleasures of the exotic; for good or bad, agricultural exports continue to play a significant role in household and national economies throughout Latin America. A better understanding of the processes that shape international production, trade, and consumption remains an important undertaking.