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2015

Nygren , A 2015 , ' Governance and Images : Representations of Certified Southern Producers in High-Quality Design Markets ' , Environmental Values , vol. 24 , no. 3 , pp. 391-412 . <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327114X13947900181798>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/231398>

<https://doi.org/10.3197/096327114X13947900181798>

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Governance and images:

Representations of certified southern producers in high-quality design markets

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the representational politics of global commodity networks, where certified forest products are produced and consumed, approaching them as complex forms of governance in which diverse actors, images, conventions and values interact. The study draws upon a case study of certified Honduran community forestry groups producing furniture and kitchenware for Danish design markets. Special focus is on the forms of negotiation and contestation through which the different actors mediate the representations and imagery circulating in the marketing of certified products and on their differential access to control and power. The research illustrates how leading retailers, in negotiation with environmental organisations, modify definitions of quality and guide consumers' expectations of certified southern forest products, by building images of southern community forest producers as authentic and exotic 'others'. The article concludes that certification as a market-based form of governance has had only limited impact on altering the unequal relationships characteristic of global networks of production and consumption.

Keywords: community forestry, certification, governance, images, values

INTRODUCTION

Forestry is the activity that provides the most cash in this community. Every family has someone working in the forest. If they don't saw, they carry planks on their shoulders. Forestry doesn't make you rich, but it helps you to survive...It's a hard job. I often begin turning in my sleep in the early morning hours, knowing that I must go to carry planks.

With these words Arnoldo, a 36-year-old member of a Río Cangrejal community forestry group in northern Honduras, describes how he and his fellow villagers work, heading up the mountain at dawn to carry planks of *marapolán* to be sold to a furniture factory in the city of La Ceiba.¹ Arnoldo has a threadbare sofa cushion on his shoulder to prevent the planks from chafing the skin. The men are pleased that logging operations exist since opportunities for work in the Honduran countryside are limited, and people must earn their livelihood from various sources. Forestry incomes are crucial for basic living, as well as for covering the costs of unexpected illness or crop failure. The community forestry groups of Río Cangrejal represent one of the oldest community forestry initiatives to have been certified anywhere in the world. The groups received their first certificate of good forest management from the Rainforest Alliance in 1991, and this certificate was later accredited by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) in 1993 (Markopoulos, 2003).²

A diverse range of environmental, fairtrade and ethical-trade certifications have emerged recently as popular mechanisms for ensuring that environmental and social responsibilities are taken seriously in agricultural production, forest management, fisheries, mining and biofuel production (Auld, 2010; Carrier 2010; Daviron and Vagneron, 2011; Partzsc, 2011). As a market-based mechanism, certification in all its forms has been considered a promising way to create alternative approaches to governance in situations

¹ The names of all the informants and firms have been changed to protect their anonymity.

² The groups have since received various recertifications under the umbrella organisation Cooperativa Agroforestal Regional (COATLAHL) (FSC, 2009).

where conventional forms of government regulation have been criticised as inadequate and too slow (Ebeling and Yasué, 2009). Third-party certifications have been lauded as innovative win-win solutions in which markets serve as important drivers of environmental conservation and consumers play a crucial role in the establishment of environmentally and socially sustainable development. As market-driven instruments, certification schemes are based on the expectation that end-consumers will pay a price premium for certified products, and in this way support efforts to improve environmental conservation and to enhance local livelihoods (Dauvergne and Lister, 2010; MacDonald, 2007). In an impressive campaign on behalf of Río Cangrejal certified forests in 2007, the brochure by FSC-Denmark thus assured readers that:

When forestry complies with the principles of FSC, nature, animals and local communities are affected in a positive way...With your purchases, you send a strong signal to your surroundings and provide direct support to the forest owners, who have chosen forestry based on respect for people and nature.

However, there is little empirical research analysing the ways southern producers are represented in the publicity materials associated with certified products and how these representations relate to the conditions under which these products are actually produced or to the position of the southern producers in global commodity networks. This article analyses the imagery and other representations of certified Honduran community forestry groups that produce small furniture and kitchenware for the Danish design markets. It examines certification schemes as complex forms of governance in which different actors, interests, images and values interact. Of particular interest are the negotiation and contestation processes through which the actors shape the images of certified forest products and how southern forest producers are presented and positioned in the marketing of certified products. As both Carrier (2010) and Dolan (2010) note, empirical research on certified networks has largely focused on productive relations, with less attention paid to the symbolic struggles

involved in the marketing and consumption of the products. The following analysis conceptualises the representational politics of certified networks as socially constructed arenas in which struggles over material resources and cultural representations, and over economic productivity and social justice, are fundamentally intertwined.

The popularity of certification is linked to globalisation and to neoliberal economic policies under which global commodity markets are simultaneously integrating and disintegrating (Humphreys, 2006: 116–123). Whereas 25 per cent of global productive capacity in the forestry sector currently lies in the hands of ten multinational companies (Mikkilä and Toppinen, 2008: 500–501) and the sale of standardised furniture is concentrating in large ‘do-it-yourself’ stores, the sale of highly branded, customised stylish furniture is being diverted into specialist interior design stores associated with certain lifestyles (Eden, 2009). The same applies to agro-food markets. The leading ten agro-food retailers, with their standardised production processes, control 25 per cent of the global food market, while specialised agro-food industries largely trade in niche markets, advertising their distinctive environmental, social, nutritional and health qualities (Dicken, 2007: 367–368). Environmentally friendly and socially responsible products are in demand especially in these niche markets. This demand has been fuelled by environmental activists and NGOs, which have pressured global retailers to commit to buying certified products and so rebranding their corporate image as environmentally and socially responsible (McCarthy, 2006; Tollefson et al., 2008). In this sense, certification is closely linked to the fairtrade, ethical trade and social justice movements, which are searching for new ways to address problems of environmental degradation and social inequality in a globalising world (Barrientos and Dolan, 2006; Raynolds et al., 2007).

Although forest certification has expanded rapidly in recent years, its geographical and social distribution remains uneven. By mid-2010, about 355 million hectares of the world’s

forestland, representing 9 per cent of the global forest estate, had been certified. About 56 per cent of these forests were located in North America, 24 per cent in Western Europe, and 8 per cent in Latin America, Asia, and Africa (ITTO 2010; UNECE/FAO, 2010). These figures indicate that most of the growth in certification has occurred in boreal and temperate forests rather than in the tropical forests whose conservation certification was initially intended to support. Most of the forest certificates have been awarded to industrial operators, whereas only one per cent of community forests have been certified. This is despite the fact that 27 per cent of the forest estate in 15 of the most forested developing countries is owned or managed by local communities (Bieri and Nygren, 2011: 146).

The first section of this article reviews the relevant theoretical approaches, the second explains the methods utilised in this study. The third section analyses the images and representations prevalent in the marketing of certified southern forest products, along with the strategies that the different actors use in negotiating such images. The fourth section examines what forms of governance and power characterise the production and trade of certified products. The final section presents some conclusions concerning certification, governance and image-building.

REPRESENTATIONAL POLITICS AND VALUE-ADDING IN CERTIFIED NETWORKS

Global commodity networks, and the values embedded in them, have been studied via examining the movement of certain goods from production to consumption, and considering the distribution of power between the actors and institutions involved. Interesting analyses have been carried out, for example, on the networks of Fairtrade coffee, bananas, Rooibos tea, ethically traded garments, tourism, mobile telephones and the automobile industry (Barrientos

and Dolan, 2006; Carrier 2010; Dicken, 2007; Dolan, 2010; Raynolds and Ngcwangu, 2010). Recently, increasing attention has focused on the impact of hybrid forms of governance, such corporate responsibility programmes or transnational movement pressure, on global commodity networks and on the power of different actors to influence which goods and services are produced, by whom and under what conditions (Eden; 2009; Goodman, 2010).

Any analysis of global commodity networks requires careful consideration of multifaceted local-global linkages, and an understanding that localities are increasingly shaped by global flows of capital, knowledge, images and ideas, while local institutions, cultural values and social movements mediate the meanings of these flows in place-specific ways. Examining these various dynamics requires an approach that grasps the diversity of actors situated across a variety of sites at multiple scales (Dicken, 2007: 8–19). The certified forestry groups of Río Cangrejal provide an interesting case of how the livelihoods of southern producers are increasingly linked to global commodity networks that bring geographically and culturally distant people, products and practices together under complex intersections of meaning and power. Simultaneously, by questioning the unequal forms of governance and the unfair definitions of the values involved, southern producers attempt to reformulate the impact of these networks on their lives and livelihoods.

Analysing such intersections requires an approach which conceptualises economic activities as tightly embedded within social networks, cultural values and political power relationships. In this vein, this article combines the analysis of southern forest producers' position in global commodity networks with recent formulations of the convention approach in studies related to producer-consumers relations (Dolan, 2007; Evans, 2011; Klooster 2006; Ponte and Gibbon, 2005). The convention approach provides useful ways to analyse the conventions - or a set of common principles and the values involved – that different actors employ to justify their evaluations of product quality in market exchanges. It also helps to

examine how particular images come to govern the marketing of certain products in global commodity networks. In particular, this concerns the focus on quality as an arena of social construction and contestation, typical of the convention approach.

In global commodity networks, market conventions that rely on price and economic profitability to evaluate product quality, together with industrial conventions – such as evaluations of quality by standards of productivity and reliability – play a crucial role (Table 1). However, a tendency to build on civic conventions, according to which the quality of a product is determined by its impact on the environment and society, is growing especially in the context of certified products. As Freidberg (2003) and Trainor (2006) note, quality is not merely a physical characteristic, rather, it refers to features not unanimously recognised, and whose meanings – such as purity, beauty, or social virtue – are ambiguous. Furthermore, in certified networks, definitions of quality are increasingly focused on the methods of production rather than on the product itself (Raynolds et al., 2007). While wood quality has traditionally been based on product standards, such as solidity or appearance, determining the quality of certified wood nowadays includes an array of standards related to the conditions under which the wood is produced. In these new standards, values concerning environmental and social responsibility, workers' rights and traceability play a crucial role (Valkila and Nygren, 2010).

Amid these issues, domestic conventions, in which the authenticity of origin, attachment to local traditions, or brand name of a product is used as a measure of its quality, provide new meanings to associate with a particular place of production, especially in niche markets, where the story behind a product shapes much of its value. The cultural representations embedded in such narratives play an important role in marketing of certified products (Goodman, 2010). In particular this concerns the trade of southern products on northern markets, a situation in which the different actors' views of environmental soundness,

social responsibility and quality of production may differ in significant ways from each other (Lyon, 2006). As the following analysis shows, discursive practices and political power relationships play an important role in mediating the images constructed around the marketing of certified products. Such analysis can provide important insights into the role of cultural representations in shaping the governance of global commodity networks. It will also open up a critical examination of the images upon which such representations are based and of the opportunities for environmental, fairtrade and ethical-trade certifications to transform prevailing trade networks between the South and the North.

MULTI-SITED RESEARCH

This study is based on multi-sited ethnographic research carried out in 2004 and 2007–2010 in different, but closely interconnected, places. Multi-sited research allows for tracking particular items as they are transferred across diverse networks and social scales (Gezon, 2010). This study focuses on how certified southern forest products and the images associated with them are linked to global commodity networks, and what kinds of images and representations emerge in the marketing of these products to northern consumers.

To understand the relations of production involved in certified forest networks, I began by carrying out ethnographic field research in the forest communities of Río Cangrejal in Honduras. I conducted 58 thematic interviews with both forestry group members and non-members in five forest-based communities. Together with researchers in forest economics, we also conducted a household survey of the livelihood strategies of 165 local households, their incomes and costs, and the opportunities and constraints they faced. The results of these indicate that the residents of Río Cangrejal earn their living from a varied array of activities, including small-scale agriculture, animal husbandry, casual wage work, informal trading and

remittances from relatives who have migrated to work in the USA. Community forestry provides an important, though sporadic source of income; the share of forestry income in the local household income portfolio frequently exceeds that of agriculture. However, poor infrastructure, competition with illegal loggers, tight quality requirements and hierarchical forms of trade make it difficult for local forestry groups to secure a profitable market niche, even when they produce certified timber.

The information provided in the interviews was cross-checked with participant observation of people's daily lives. Visits to local fields, forests and marketplaces provided important insights into prevailing methods of production, while participation in meetings and social gatherings offered valuable information on the social networks and political power relationships involved. In addition, I conducted thematic interviews with representatives of Honduran sawmills, furniture workshops, furnishing companies and furniture factories. Visits to these workplaces offered valuable insights into the processing methods and the images and representations involved in the marketing and trading of the products.

To understand the representational politics that link southern forest products to northern markets, I also carried out fieldwork in Denmark, the main destination for Río Cangrejal's certified products. I conducted interviews with wholesalers and retailers of tropical wood, representatives of furniture firms and furnishing stores, and I participated in furnishing expositions where retailers presented their forthcoming items. Representatives of thirty forest authorities, development experts, and government institutions and NGOs with close links to forest certification, both in Honduras and Denmark, were also interviewed. The information obtained through these interviews was supplemented by policy documents, certification evaluations and development reports that were subjected to qualitative content analysis.

The consumption of market goods intrinsically involves shared conventions. Multi-

sited ethnographic analysis can provide important insights into the impact of northern imaginaries of consumption on southern environments and communities of production (Tsing, 2005). At the same time, it can help to trace the dynamics by which representations of southern environments and local communities circulate through global commodity networks, and how they are governed by unequal relations of knowledge and power.

GOVERNANCE OF IMAGES

In the global trade of forest products, market and industrial conventions play a crucial role: price, economic value, efficiency, and reliability remain key contributors to competitiveness and to the evaluation of product quality (Table 1). These conditions also apply to the trade in certified forest products, where leading northern retailers with low prices and efficient supply chains occupy a vital position (Dauvergne and Lister, 2010). However, as environmental and social concerns grow in popularity among the general public, proactive retailers, in negotiation with influential ENGOs, exert further pressure on civic conventions, according to which the quality of a product is determined issues of environmental and social responsibility. Furthermore, as the following analysis demonstrates, in the marketing of certified products, civic conventions are increasingly embedded with domestic conventions, in which the product quality is measured by its attachment to place and local traditions.

The marketing of certified products is largely based on the idea that people consume images in the same way as they consume material products (Varul, 2008: 659). An important element of marketing is thus the construction of images and meanings, which link certified products to certain lifestyles and identities. With regard to southern forest products, images of distance and authenticity play a crucial role. Exotic views of rainforests and picturesque portrayals of local people as stewards of tropical biodiversity create images of local

communities as authentic others. Although 97 per cent of all commercial wood production in Honduras concerns pine, certification in Honduras focuses largely on humid tropical forests. This is because the images of certified products sourced from pine forests, even if native, are not considered 'distinct' or 'exotic' enough to raise interest in northern niche markets.

Interwoven with these images of authenticity are categorical conceptions of community forestry. The relations of production among southern people are portrayed as unreserved ties of solidarity, where unselfish co-operation and helpfulness flourish – asymmetrical webs of intermediation and hierarchical forms of dependence are simply brushed aside. In marketing of certified products, this assurance that the solidarity absent in northern post-industrial societies still exists in southern communities plays a crucial role (Wright, 2004: 667). Through such images, southern producers are reified as traditional others, with intrinsic environmental knowledge and innate respect for local traditions.

Within this imagery, the southern producer thus becomes a vehicle for selling cultural distinction as exoticism alongside tradition as beauty. In fact, at furnishing expositions in Denmark that carried items sourced from tropical forests, I had difficulty identifying the furniture and accessories produced by southern community forestry groups behind all the styling. Certified products are sold on specific markets, where the aim is to design strongly branded products whose purchase allows consumers to demonstrate their own originality, sophisticated sense of style, and concern for global environmental and social responsibility (Lyon, 2006). Such efforts are designed to give consumers the feeling that through their personal acts of consumption at home they can make a difference elsewhere. Locally grounded narratives associated with the certified southern products are supposed to impart a human face to them, thereby providing the consumer with an opportunity to encounter selected aspects of a local producer and a local way of life. These stories rely on domestic conventions, by passing information on product quality to consumers through highly stylised,

origin-based ‘trust’ narratives (Goodman, 2004). Characteristic of these stories is the assurance that the certification has substantially improved local living standards, as Carlos, a member of Río Cangrejal’s certified forestry group, explains in the FSC brochure:

...several large privately owned companies had gotten access to export wood from our area. This meant that a lot of forest disappeared, and the prices for wood were very low...The help from Svettan [Danish development project, name changed] made everything different – for us and for the forest. I can now afford to live in a brick house and send my daughter, Yasmin, to school so she can have a real education.

Carlos’ sun-scorched face looks directly at the camera, creating a feeling of a personal connection between the viewer and the producer. The use of his first name further strengthens this sense of familiarity. However, this acquaintance requires no in-depth tie on the part of the consumer because the story makes it clear that Carlos lives far away. In light of my field experience, I doubt that the face in the picture actually belongs to the Carlos I recognise from the attached narrative; the face is too indigenous-looking and dark-skinned to belong to the relatively fair-skinned Carlos I know, who is actively engaged in certified forestry in Río Cangrejal. This publicity campaign also produces a one-dimensional encounter between producer and consumer. During my interviews in Río Cangrejal, it became clear that most of the local forestry groups knew little of where the certified forest products are sold or the identity of the consumers who buy their products. To modify from Wright’s (2004: 669) analysis of Fairtrade marketing: as a consumer I can see Carlos, but he cannot see me.

Readers of this brochure also have no opportunity to become familiar with the values that local people themselves attach to the certified products. The skilfully designed kitchen stools and doormats produced from Río Cangrejal hardwoods are tailored for sophisticated northern markets and would, in fact, have little utility in many of the local earth-floor huts. In several discussions, the producers in Río Cangrejal wondered about the way ‘everything has

to be natural, respecting the original colour of the timber, when the products are sold abroad'. In the opinion of the local people, kitchen stools painted in bright colours and doormats decorated with flower designs would be much more appealing.

As they contemplated their relationship with the forest, the inhabitants of Río Cangrejal noted that without the certification, most of the region's forests would already have been cleared for cattle raising. They also pointed out that certified forestry has improved local resource rights and provided an important supplement to local livelihoods. Simultaneously, however, local people questioned northern NGOs' views of forest conservation as an intrinsic value. For local producers, a forest is a place to earn a living and a crucial 'task-space' (Ingold, 2000: 195), not an irreplaceable treasure of global biodiversity or a pristine cradle of nature. By pointing out that the environmental sustainability of local timber production cannot be separated from the social responsibility inherent in the processing and trading of certified products, local forestry groups questioned northern NGOs' tendency to prioritise environmental soundness at the cost of social fairness in their certification evaluations. Local forestry groups were non-plussed by the silvicultural treatments northern certifiers required for improving the conservation of forest biodiversity, as these requirements increased the groups' workload with few economic benefits in return. At the same time, the forestry groups told me amusing stories of northern certifiers' inspection tours in Río Cangrejal:

Those foreigners didn't even know how to walk in these forests. We had to support them so that they wouldn't end up crawling in the mud or on steep slopes. After a trip to the forest they were really exhausted, and we had to look after them. One of them phoned New York and claimed that 'these folks must be given a certificate because they work under extremely difficult conditions!'

Interestingly, in this case the certifiers felt that the forests of Río Cangrejal represented a difficult and demanding environment in which local forestry groups must work to care for

world biodiversity. Yet the forestry groups' hostile working conditions in the face of illegal logging, hierarchical webs of intermediaries, and unequal trade relationships, were barely mentioned in the certifiers' evaluation reports. In many of my interviews, members of the Río Cangrejal forestry groups themselves pointed out how difficult it is for them to compete on shifting forest markets where the requirements of processors and retailers change frequently. Many of them also lamented how hierarchical patterns of timber trade limit their opportunities to benefit from forestry. Owing to the lack of collateral, the groups depended on informal credit with urban timber dealers advancing them money on condition that the timber would be delivered to the dealer who financed the operation (Nygren and Myatt-Hirvonen, 2009). Such personalised debt relations, which remained largely in place even in certified networks, offered limited opportunities for local forestry groups to negotiate better terms of trade.

Pressuring the southern community forestry groups to embark on new organisational models and business operations required on global markets also means imposing potential risks on them. Certified timber production requires long-term investments and business strategies, but low-income southern producers often make their production decisions according to what they can afford at the moment. In practice, doing business in Río Cangrejal consists of a series of transactions that are pursued face-to-face through informal channels where considerable attention is devoted to personalised networks of trust. There is a danger that through certification southern community forestry groups are pressured into adopting production models in which neoliberal concepts of profitability and efficiency, together with northern ideas of environmental and social responsibility, are imposed upon other life-worlds and radically different conceptions of environmental and social justice (Veuthey and Gerber, 2011: 242–243).

As market-based mechanisms, certification schemes are based on the neoliberal agenda that promoting trade with developing countries, rather than offering them

development aid, is the most efficient strategy to alleviate poverty (Vramo, 2012). The idea is that through certified trade, the southern poor are better able to preserve their dignity, because the economic support they receive is no longer based on charity, but on their capacity to supply high-quality products for environmentally and ethically sensitive markets (Varul, 2008). A Danish development expert working in Honduras expressed this belief as follows:

In my view, people should buy certified products because they are of good quality and people like them, not because they feel pity...Images make a big difference in doing business. Danish consumers are...especially interested in the protection of tropical forests and are willing to buy sustainably managed tropical wood. They are looking for the story behind the product and are willing to pay more for it if the story is beautiful and touching.

In this view, northern consumers are no longer passive objects of marketing, but active promoters of sustainable development who can influence the state of southern forests and the lives of southern communities through their purchases (Wright, 2004). Simultaneously, they can show their sense of global solidarity, sharing their inner dreams with the southern poor who, made familiar by the narratives even as they remain 'exotic others', are no longer so distant that northern consumers would be prevented from feeling a sense of empathy towards them. This is clear from the quotation in the FSC brochure presented in the Introduction, which argues that through their purchasing decisions, consumers have the opportunity to support forestry that is 'based on respect for people and nature'.

At the same time, the complexity of global commodity networks enables consumers to demonstrate their solidarity without having to bear direct responsibility for the environmental and social consequences of their consumption. Because of the socio-spatial distance between producers and consumers, the latter need not attach their ethics of care to a personal commitment, nor do they need to understand the causes and consequences of the southern producers' marginalisation on the global markets. My interviews with sawmill operators,

furniture factory managers, furnishing retailers and end-consumers clarified that most had little knowledge of the principles of forest certification. Honduran sawmill operators and furniture factory managers confused certified timber with legal timber, and were eager to convince me that ‘all the wood in our processing plant is legally logged’. Danish wholesalers, retailers and end-consumers were interested in forest certification mainly as a means to ensure that the products they handle are not produced from illegal timber and that their production does not contribute to tropical forest degradation.

International ENGOs have played a crucial role in governing the representations related to forest certification (Klooster, 2006). However, many of their campaigns are based on categorical black-and-white images in which the purchase of non-certified products is considered immoral because it rests on a form of forestry that destroys rainforests and endangers local livelihoods. In contrast, the purchase of certified products is branded as responsible consumption, where values supporting environmental and social responsibility have replaced forest degradation and social marginalisation. Certified products are marketed as ‘guilt-free’ products whose purchase gives consumers moral satisfaction; what remains unnoticed is the fact that the ways certified products are branded in marketing campaigns, selectively highlight some aspects while ignoring many others (Eden, 2009). Representations of local working conditions, for example, are carefully controlled because images of people sawing timber barefoot or carrying planks on their shoulders on muddy slopes can cast a shadow of gloom over the pleasure of consumption as customers select furniture for their carefully tended domestic gardens or choose stools for their fashionably furnished kitchens.

In this context, the role of the southern producer is reduced to expressing loyalty towards local traditions, whilst northern consumers are presented as cosmopolitans who proficiently combine different styles and find inspiration in foreign cultures. Many of the marketing campaigns of furnishing retailers and ENGOs highlight how certain internationally

known designers have offered their contributions to the design of environmentally certified or ethically-traded southern products. These designers are eagerly portrayed, together with the narratives of their ethical design principles, in brochures publicising certified products. In this way, marketing tactics graft elegant whiffs of modernity with tradition and locality with transnationality – as desired by cosmopolitan consumers – along with domestic conventions that emphasise the traceability of a product's origin. In marketing its environmentally certified products in an exposition in Denmark, the prospectus of a large furnishing company expressed the matter as follows:

Our designers have worked closely with people in villages...to combine thousand-year-old handicraft knowledge with...high-tech production techniques. The result is an explosion of design innovations and expressions never seen before...a beautiful mixture of old and new expressions.

In such combinations, the role of southern producers is that of reassuring the uniqueness of northern consumers' acts of consumption. With traces of southern distinction and local craftsmanship, the products are stylised as original. At the same exposition, the advertising manager of a large furniture retailing store presented their new design products as manifestations fulfilling consumers' yearning for uniqueness:

People long for items inspired by nature and items that are unique. Look at this cloth...Each textile carries the signature of the woman who made it, so each item is unique, a piece of art. You can find a lot of stories behind the products. In fact, each item is a story in and of itself.

What is problematic in this kind of image-building is that through this imagery, the consumption of certified products in the North is seen as a 'receipt' for poverty mitigation in the South, with little consideration of the terms of southern producers' participation in the

global markets, or the distribution of benefits and constraints among the actors involved. It opens up the question: what will happen to the majority of the southern forest communities who will never be able to acquire a certificate for their forestry operations? Another problem involved in such marketing campaigns is the fact that the highly stylised branding of certified products not only essentialises the northern consumers' views of southern communities but also frames their conceptions of ethics and sustainable consumption (Carrier, 2010). This concerns not only the FSC certification of southern forest products but also the on-going mainstreaming of Fairtrade and organic certifications related to southern agricultural products.

IMAGES OF GOVERNANCE

In the governance of certified commodity networks, considerable emphasis is placed on consumers' ability to formulate moral associations between economy and environment, and to base their purchasing decisions on assessments of environmental and social responsibility. Through careful image-building, trade of certified forest products are presented as contrary to the socially asymmetrical relationships of conventional trade. As a manager of a big furniture store explained to me: 'This is a story that really makes a difference. We are helping people to help themselves out of poverty.' Correspondingly, the FSC brochure on the certified forests in Río Cangrejal declares: 'Our story shows that a win win situation actually can be created – both for the environment and for the humans living in it.' Such impressive success stories belie the complexity of the conditions under which southern small producers operate, and the multiple requirements that certification places upon them.

Firstly, there is a risk that tight requirements for quality will exclude an increasing number of southern producers from the markets. Certified products must fulfil both the certification's requirements for sustainability and the niche market's demands for quality. As

Goodman (2010: 115) notes, a growing number of southern producers have nothing to sell on the global market: no sophisticated products, no fascinating stories, no marvellous landscapes and no exotic faces. Only one per cent of southern community forestry groups has been able to obtain a forest certificate, and most of them have received it through financial support from international development projects. In Río Cangrejal, the costs of certification have reached US\$12,000 in various re-certifications; the groups were unable to pay this amount of money without help from development projects (Bieri and Nygren, 2011). Exactly how many southern community forestry groups will be able to compete in certified markets after the development aid ends, remains unclear.

Secondly, not all the requirements set by certification are suitable in the conditions of southern community forestry. In Río Cangrejal, FSC-accredited certifiers have required that certified groups establish mechanisms for the efficient integration of the wider community into the decision-making concerning forest management and the distribution of forestry incomes. This requirement fails to acknowledge that in the existing usufruct contracts, legal responsibility for forest management is assigned to the forestry groups, who therefore bear the risks and costs involved. Further, Honduran legislation limits each community forestry group's harvest to 200 m³ of timber annually, which makes it difficult to channel the economic benefits of wood production to a wide range of community members. The demand that forest operations cater to the needs of all community members relies on a conventional view of southern communities as socially cohesive units in which resources are collectively managed and benefits equitably shared. Such a view underestimates the heterogeneity of the resource users involved and the complexity of power relationships through which access to productive resources is mediated (Nygren, 2005; Ribot, 2009). Correspondingly, the FSC requirement that the local communities' usufruct rights be clearly documented and legally established, fails to fully recognise the legal pluralism and the diversity of customary rights

prevalent in many southern communities (Ribot and Peluso, 2003).

Although certification campaigns juxtapose the exploitative relationships of conventional forestry with the forms of solidarity involved in certified forestry, in reality, the extent to which northern consumers' social responsibility is increased through certification remains unclear. One is left to wonder whether the images and narratives constructed in the marketing of certified products tell us more about northern consumers' inner desires than about concrete success in reducing global inequality. Despite high expectations, the price premiums paid for certified community forest producers have at best been modest (Bieri and Nygren, 2011; Dauvergne and Lister, 2010). The mental journey of doormats made from Río Cangrejal hardwoods is quite different from the material itinerary of these products as they travel through global markets.

Certification programmes have undoubtedly provided several benefits for southern producers. In Río Cangrejal, it has improved the local forestry groups' awareness of the value of their forests, facilitated government recognition of customary resource rights, and increased the local forestry groups' participation in designing forest policies. It has also provided documented evidence of these groups' environmentally and socially responsible forest management, which has generated wider recognition and legitimacy for their activities. However, insofar as certified products are marketed as authentic and unique, southern forests are at risk of being commoditised as places of mystery, while southern producers are reified as exotic others whose marginal position in global markets is conveniently overlooked. Meanwhile, this kind of marketing provides opportunities for northern retailers to profit from differentiated product offer that invokes images of sophistication and social responsibility, while leading consumers to focus on the essentialised characteristics of the southern products instead of the political-economic conditions involved in their production, processing and trade.

On the other hand, if no such exotic other existed, certified products would be less appealing to consumers. As Wright (2004: 678) notes, whether northern consumers would feel a moral duty to purchase the products of southern producers if they felt that these producers were in the same socio-economic position as they are, remains questionable. Selected portrayals of humble others who care for tropical biodiversity and who toil for a living by cherishing local traditions, are an inseparable part of the sale of certified products. If certified products forfeit their flavour of difference and their fame as products sourced from environments managed in sustainable ways, they will risk losing the distinction that has contributed to the demand for these goods among certain groups of northern consumers.

Especially problematic in forest certification is the fact that most certificates awarded to community forestry groups set considerable demands on local producers but make few demands for making changes elsewhere in the network. Most consumers are unaware that there exist two types of forest certificate: 1) certificates of forest management and 2) certificates of the chain of custody. In certificates of forest management, the requirements for environmental and social responsibility apply only to the phase of timber production; in certificates of the chain of custody, the requirements apply to all phases from production to retailing. Nearly all the certificates granted for southern community forest groups, including that in Río Cangrejal, are certificates of forest management. This is a mechanism that provides opportunities for northern retailers to transfer a considerable part of the costs related to environmental and social sustainability onto the southern producers (Guthman, 2007).

Because of the technical and economic requirements of wood processing, global networks of forest production and trade are highly complex. Certified forest products are sold mainly in conventional niche markets; the investments required for processing are so high that creating alternative marketing channels characteristic of Fairtrade coffee, cocoa, or cashew, for example, is difficult. Correspondingly, in the trade of certified forest products, prices are

largely left to the workings of the market, and there are no guaranteed minimum prices for producers, or premiums for social development similar to those of Fairtrade and organic coffee, banana or pineapple (Daviron and Vagneron, 2011; Valkila and Nygren, 2010). Although many end-consumers state that they would be willing to pay a premium for certified forest products if this helped conserve tropical forests, in reality, most consumers prioritise low prices and easy availability when purchasing furniture for their home, to say nothing of constructing a house or making other large investments (Dauvergne and Lister, 2010). Recently, FSC and Fairtrade have launched a joint pilot project whereby the forest sources that are FSC certified could be labelled by Fairtrade standards for timber (FLO, 2012). Regarding Fairtrade's commitment to promoting alternative trade relations between the South and the North, this arrangement could improve FSC's credibility as a socially responsible trade network. However, there is no guarantee of a price premium for producers, even within this dual FSC/FLO standard, which raises certain doubts over its innovativeness.

As market-driven mechanisms, certification schemes are based on the idea that the role of government actors in environmental regulation is reduced (Bernstein and Cashore, 2007). The consequences of this view have been ambiguous, at least in Honduras, where forest authorities have repeatedly stated that it is the task of certified forestry groups to protect the forests under their management from illegal logging. As a result, Río Cangrejal forestry groups have been obliged to establish a system of voluntary forest guards. This is a very dangerous task, as most illegal timber harvesters are armed and, in the worst cases, linked to drug dealing (Nygren and Myatt-Hirvonen, 2009). Certification can hardly replace government responsibility for forest regulation and law enforcement.

Overall, the potential of certification to promote a transformation towards global sustainable development is frequently exaggerated. Many of the problems faced by FSC in certifying southern community forestry groups are common in most of the certification

schemes seeking to certify southern producers. The environmental and social standards embodied in certification schemes are difficult to evaluate, and even conscientious consumers are often unaware of them. Furthermore, individual consumers have little capacity to radically alter the structures of global trade (Jaffee and Howard, 2010). Fairtrade coffee, for example, currently represents only one per cent of global coffee production, while five transnational companies control half of the global retail coffee market (Fairtrade Foundation, 2012; Valkila and Nygren, 2010). Especially as concerns the trade of certified forest products, household consumer demand represents only a small fraction of global timber consumption compared to large industrial, commercial and institutional demands (Dauvergne and Lister, 2010). There is a risk that mainstreaming of various kinds of certification schemes is watering down the initial goals of fairtrade movements. At the same time, large retail companies are creating a new quality reference for mainstream agricultural and forest products, and in this way, capturing the symbolic attributes of environmental soundness and social responsibility associated with certified products. These very attributes are at the core of adding value and making profits in today's consumer markets (Daviron and Vagneron, 2011).

CONCLUSION

This article has analysed certification as a market-based form of governance where an array of images, conventions, values and political power relationships mediate the production and consumption of certified products. The multi-sited ethnographic analysis of the representational politics around the marketing of certified Honduran forest products to Danish markets, served to demonstrate the essentialist image-building and unequal power relationships that shape the ways certified southern products are produced, traded and consumed in global commodity networks.

I have argued that to understand the ways in which leading retailers shape the

representational politics of certified commodity networks, it is important to address the issues of quality and the conventions and values involved in the evaluation of quality. Beyond the market and industrial conventions that revolve around prices and economies of scale, domestic and civic conventions play a crucial role in the definition of quality of certified products. In the marketing of certified products, domestic conventions that present views of exotic rainforests and picturesque portrayals of local producers as stewards of tropical biodiversity, create essentialist images of local communities as authentic others. These images are combined with civic conventions that emphasise the environmental and social responsibility of local production, whilst scant attention is paid to southern producers' marginal position in the global markets.

Most certified products are sold in niche markets, where the aim is to design highly branded products whose purchase enables consumers to demonstrate their sense of style and solidarity with southern producers. Selected pictures of southern producers, who cherish local traditions and toil for their living accordingly, are thus crucial to the sale of certified products, but they risk commoditising southern environments as places of mystery and reifying southern producers as exotic others. The civic conventions that emphasise the northern consumers' ethic of care toward far-away peoples may shorten the 'distance' between southern producers and northern consumers, but such conventions do not necessarily change the asymmetrical power relations of global trade (Dolan, 2010).

Leading northern retailers, in negotiations with influential ENGOs, have played an important role in mediating consumers' perceptions of certified southern products, and in this way, the conceptions of global solidarity and ethical consumption. Through a careful combination of industrial, domestic and civic conventions in product marketing, retailers have succeeded establishing distinguished brands of authenticity and corporate responsibility and profited from it. Southern small producers meanwhile usually have little knowledge of the

quality issues being communicated to northern consumers. Such corporate image-building can lead to ‘fetishising’ localness and downplaying the forms of political-economic inequality that condition the southern producers’ incorporation into global commodity networks (Carrier, 2010; Goodman, 2010). Some researchers even warn that certification risks turning into ‘double fetishism’. The environmental and social relations of production that lie behind the product are ‘unveiled’ in such a selective way that it easily leads to construction of new kinds of fetishes (Guthman, 2007). In addition, most of the certifications focus on revealing merely the conditions of production, while the political-economic relations of processing, trade and consumption are largely left invisible.

Forest certification in particular has had only limited impact on altering the uneven relationships characteristic of the global trade. The certificates that dominate in the community forestry sector focus on sustainable forest management making few significant requirements elsewhere in the network. Because the forest areas managed by southern community forestry groups are relatively small, these groups have few opportunities to compete in markets based on mass production. Furthermore, domestic markets for certified products are limited in most developing countries. The only opportunity for community forestry groups is to sell their products in global niche markets, which demand high quality and elevated standards of environmental sustainability. The prices paid to southern producers seldom compensate for the costs of certification.

As market-driven forms of governance, certification schemes alone may be unable to create long-term alternative economies between the South and the North. Viable strategies for minimising the vulnerabilities of southern producers in maintaining their livelihoods through engagement in rapidly shifting global markets would be needed in all certification schemes (Auld, 2010). As long as large retail companies appropriate the responsibility discourse and reap the profits from the niches that have been painstakingly built by fairtrade movements

(Barrientos et al., 2007), significant changes in environmental and social responsibility across the global production and consumption will not be achieved by requiring southern producers to develop environmentally friendly and socially sustainable production systems.

What is equally problematic in market-driven certification schemes is that they treat environmental and social responsibility as bound to consumers' personal choices and shifting aesthetics. Overestimating the potential of individual consumers to change the prevalent structures of the global trade, can actually alleviate pressures on governments and corporations to make fundamental changes (Dauvergne and Lister, 2010).

The recent mainstreaming of certification schemes has, in fact, led many researchers and activists to question, what precisely makes these projects 'alternative' any more. Initially, fairtrade, organic and ethical-trade movements challenged the structural injustices of mainstream markets, and aimed to redress the disadvantageous socio-economic conditions faced by southern producers in the global markets, by explicitly encouraging alternative trade networks (Daviron and Vagneron, 2011). Current certifications increasingly rely on mainstream markets as sites of progressive politics of 'care at a distance', which raises many questions so long as scarce attention is paid to global inequalities. There is concern that instead of promoting fairtrade's initial ideas of North-South solidarity, current certifications reinforce consumer sovereignty and decreased state authority, thus effectively bolstering neoliberal agendas (Dolan, 2010; Jaffee and Howard, 2010). What is therefore needed, are new strategies that combine certifications with revised forms of law enforcement, legally binding regulation and fairtrade activism. Otherwise, the majority of the environmental and social costs of northern consumption will continue to fall onto fragile environments and communities in the South, and the networks that were supposed to benefit southern small producers will end up either excluding them or incorporating them, in an unequal way, into global circuits of production and consumption.

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Table 1. Different conventions and their main criteria for the evaluation of quality.

Conventions	Criteria for the evaluation of quality
Market	price, economic value
Industrial	productivity, efficiency, reliability
Domestic	place of origin, traditions, trust, brand name
Civic	environmental and societal benefits