



# Building a Politics of Connectivity: Intercultural In-Commonness in Fairtrade

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**Abstract:** Fairtrade operates its global system through a homogenising but marketable set of standards. Combined with issues around how to include producers in governance, this has led to feelings of disconnection and disenfranchisement for the latter, which are impacting on Fairtrade's effectiveness and legitimacy. Through a focus on the South African wine industry, this paper argues that the Fairtrade community needs to be reinvigorated through dialogical communication, impactful participation and cultural synthesis to better enact responsibility across its systemic geographical and cultural distances. "Being-with" its multiple stakeholders makes space for a more responsive, contextual and connected system. Drawing on the ideas of Paulo Freire, the paper concludes that a Fairtrade built on solidarity through a participatory and decentralised system would allow for discussions of the ideals and practices that are essential to negotiating, and not swallowing up, the shifting "we" of Fairtrade and more effectively balancing its local and global responsibilities.

**Keywords:** Fairtrade, South Africa, being-in-common, being-with, solidarity, community

## Introduction

... there is no logical reason to suppose that moral boundaries should coincide with the boundaries of our everyday community; not least because these latter boundaries are themselves not closed, but rather are defined in part by an increasing set of exchanges with distant strangers. (Corbridge 1993:463)

Although written over 25 years ago, Corbridge's words highlight a continuing issue in, but not confined to, development studies and practices. What is our responsibility to culturally and geographically distant others, and how can we motivate care at a distance that is connected, equitable and non-essentialising (Silk 2004; Smith 2008)? Corbridge (1993:462) argued: "Why not learn from geography, and from the dynamics of globalisation, and make the argument that our lives are not that distinct from the lives of distant strangers?" Similarly, Massey (2004) grounded responsibility in an acknowledgement of the relational and interconnected nature of our spaces, places, communities and selves, and yet—while we live in an ever more tightly connected world—negotiating our relational responsibilities remains a challenge.

Fair Trade offers one mechanism that attempts to bridge these geographical and cultural divides through an alternative approach to trade based on globalised

commodity networks that are positioned as partnerships between producers, businesses and consumers (Fairtrade International 2018). As such, it has been understood in terms of transformation, interregional reciprocity, political solidarity and alterity (Blowfield and Dolan 2010; Reynolds 2012; Wilson and Mutersbaugh 2015), promoting ethical and political consumption through building transparent connections between producers and consumers. In 1988, labelling was introduced, which established Fairtrade—practised through standards and certification, and governed by the global institution Fairtrade International (FTI)—as the hegemonic system worldwide. Although simplistic given the heterogeneity of ideals, goals and practices at work, this can broadly be understood as a divergence between a Fair Trade “movement” and a certified Fairtrade “market”, which Naylor (2017:821) argues “ruptured the potentially transformative nature of so-called ‘fair’ trade”. While the rise of the commoditised market made mainstreaming possible, dramatically increasing sales, it also led to professionalisation, standardisation and a spatial concentration of the system (Bennett 2016; Renard 2005). This changed relationships within Fairtrade exchanges, impacting on activist and consumer trust and transparency (Trauger 2014; Wilson and Curnow 2013), and destabilising the historical centrality of producers, leading to a loss of producer power and voice (McDermott 2013; Renard 2005). In recent years, FTI’s changing institutional structures have led to more producer involvement (Anderson 2013) but challenges remain around their role in decision-making, diversity and representativeness (Bennett 2015, 2017).

This has led to issues in terms of producer inclusion in governance, certification and standards setting (Bennett 2015; Renard 2015; Wilson and Mutersbaugh 2015), which critics argue has established unidirectional and neo-colonial power relations (Naylor 2014). The industrial and market relations engendered by this certification system have in particular emphasised the geographical and cultural distance between regulators and producers (Renard 2003), which has been exacerbated by the depersonalised and institutional relations fostered by a universalising labelling model (Taylor et al. 2005). Efforts continue to be made to overcome these cultural and geographical distances (Bennett 2016) but a lack of producer knowledge, participation and empowerment within the system persists (Herman 2019a, 2019b; Renard 2015). Nonetheless, building such connections are critical for a multistakeholder system such as Fairtrade to be effective, legitimate and sustainable (Anderson 2013; Bennett 2017).

In this paper, I consider this longstanding issue of how to promote a politics of connectivity in which responsibility and care bridge geographical and cultural distance. Reflecting on the challenges Fairtrade faces in developing and promoting an equitable, ethical and inclusive system, I use Nancy’s (1991a) “being-in-common” to think through the relations and practices needed to establish and maintain a community grounded in difference and plurality. This is the recognition that our “being” is shared with others who are co-present in time and space, and so offers a relationality based on being *with*. As Popke (2009:442) notes, this conceptual “being-with” “does not tell us much about the ways in which our sociality is constituted or experienced”, and I therefore draw on ideas of ethics and

interconnectivity to consider the challenges and opportunities presented for certified Fairtrade networks in cultivating transboundary solidarity and responsibility.

First, I discuss some of the debates around the latter in Fairtrade, connecting into concerns around system governance and problematising the “community” being represented. I then introduce the empirical context through a brief history of Fairtrade in South Africa, with a particular focus on the wine industry, and an outline of the research methods. The discussion that follows highlights the importance of dialogical communication, impactful participation and solidarity through cultural synthesis in creating more inclusive Fairtrade communities, and so provides a clear roadmap to achieving being-in-common in such international networks. The empirics also emphasise the ongoing challenges of negotiating complex and, in South Africa, racialised power and labour relations between regulators, farmer-owners and workers. As such, Fairtrade networks continue to experience tensions in combining universal ideals with contextual specificity. Using Freire’s pedagogical ideas, I argue that they need to engage with the disruption, openness and fluidity that a “being-in-common” understanding of community demands in order to work towards shared, plural and dialogical responsibility.

## Fairtrade Connections and Community

Fair Trade represents a critique of historically rooted international trade inequalities and efforts to create more egalitarian commodity networks linking marginalised producers in the global South with progressive consumers in the global North. (Raynolds 2009:1083)

As such, Fair Trade is grounded in ideas of (un)fairness and practices that require geographically extensive connections. Popke (2007) notes the challenges of developing such a global ethics, and questions of how we motivate and enact responsibility and care for distant others have long challenged scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers. Geographical debates have traditionally conceptualised responsibility through an opposition between space and place (Barnett et al. 2005), with the idea that spatial and cultural “distance leads to indifference” (Smith 2000:93). However, the “moral turn” questioned if and how an ethics that is not solely dependent on proximity can be reanimated (Popke 2007). Massey (2004:6) approached this through a relational politics of place, arguing that “thinking in terms of networks and flows, and living in an age of globalisation, refashions, but does not deny, a politics of place ... propinquity needs to be negotiated”. Global responsibility is embedded in a politics of connectivity since “we are responsible to areas beyond the bounds of place not because of what we have done but because of what we are... [with a] responsibility towards the wider relations on which we depend” (Massey 2004:16-17). This recognises the co-constitutive and interconnected nature of our identities, practices and places, acknowledging these are all the product of relations that spread far beyond their immediate vicinity.

In international trade, these connections are manifested in the flows of information, commodities, capital and people that cross the globe; Fair Trade explicitly

aims to moralise these relations through a quality economy, promoting responsibility at a distance by reconnecting producers and consumers through civic and relational conventions (Raynolds 2012; Renard 2005). In the certified system, these have been institutionalised through the mechanisms of a guaranteed minimum price, a social premium to support community development and direct and transparent relations with buyers in an effort to “transform the nature of transnational economic activity” (Raynolds 2012:279). However, critics argue that Fairtrade’s strategy to work “in and against the market” reinforces capitalist relations of production (Bassett 2010), does not challenge a problematic, neoliberal conceptualisation of development (Naylor 2014) and creates and maintains producers as subjects to be “fixed”, “failing to take into account the particulars of farmers’ daily lives and politics in place” (Naylor 2017:822).

Changes in FTI have made governance more representative and democratic but giving producers a seat neither ensures that they influence policy outcomes nor means that there is broad participation from on-the-ground members (Bennett 2015, 2017). Renard argues that this disconnect has been exacerbated as FTI has grown in scale because its processes have become more technical, bureaucratic and professionalised, making it ever more “unfamiliar to producers” (2015:476) and “carried out by people without any investment in the Fair Trade movement” (2015:481). This is problematic since “the processes by which decisions are made and populations are represented matter—they determine whose references become policies for millions of marginalised workers and farmers in developing countries” (Bennett 2012:809). Therefore, such challenges in terms of FTI’s internal power relations and structures impact on how responsibility is understood and practised within its networks through shaping how regulators engage with the lived experience of Fairtrade producers (Renard 2015; Wilson and Mutersbaugh 2015).

While the focus here is on the FTI regulated market system, this is just one—albeit major—player in wider efforts to bring social and environmental ethics into commodity networks. Competition on ethical performance is intense, particularly in food systems (Food Ethics Council 2008), and the proliferation of third-party certifiers and in-house schemes to demonstrate responsible sourcing are putting FTI under both internal and external pressure to define what it is, who it is for and how it operates (Herman 2019a, 2019c). Certified Fairtrade works with 1.6 million farmers and workers worldwide (Fairtrade International 2017) in both cooperative and plantation style systems but in its efforts to “fix” development and market problems, it relies on “a dangerous assumption of homogeneity” (Naylor 2017:829). Although we may agree that Fairtrade has re-introduced some sense of community into the market (Shields 2013), when combined with the other, similarly heterogeneous stakeholders in Fairtrade systems including retailers, activists and consumers, actually defining this community becomes problematic.

For Nancy, community can be understood through the concept of “being-in-common” for “there is no common being, but there is being *in* common” (1991a:4). This is “at once singularised and pluralised, being is always already being *in relation* to other singularities” (Chen 2012:455), with the relations between them “neither ‘by’, nor ‘for’, nor ‘in’, nor ‘despite’, but rather ‘with’”

(Nancy 2000:34). For Nancy (1991a), “with” is not next to but a relation without relation that always contains the possibility of being pulled in a different direction; as such, “no genuine ethical relation can be formed if each interest group insists on its own claims of truth and justice” (Chen 2012:459). This therefore requires discussions as to what “being-in-common” or “being-with” means since a community is not “a project of fusion” (Nancy 1991b:15) but acknowledges difference and plurality, and is ultimately dependent on interaction between its singular citizens (Schwarzmantel 2007). Consequently, this requires a Fairtrade community to foster solidarity rather than benevolence-based approaches (Keahey 2016), moving away from a trustee role for FTI and making space for the differing interpretations that stakeholders may have of themselves, others, ideals and practices (Naylor 2017).

Simply framing Fairtrade as an “alternative” to conventional trade serves to mask the messiness, complexity, privilege and unevenness at work within its systems (Naylor 2018), and while marketing materials may draw on a particular narrative of producer-consumer connection, network practices do not necessarily build this (Wilson and Curnow 2013). Naylor’s (2018) work on community economies highlights the asymmetries involved and the multiple ideas of community at play within Fair Trade exchanges. She argues that what is imagined as a community composed of producer-consumer relations is better represented as related but still distanced communities centred on the consumer and certifier and, in her research, the coffee co-operative and roasters. This highlights the different interdependencies which mean that, despite Fairtrade rhetoric, this is not a community grounded in producer-consumer solidarity. As such, while acknowledging the role consumers play within Fairtrade exchanges and networks, here I am focusing on the regulator/certifier and the producers, exploring the current challenges in terms of disconnection before reflecting on how recognising these communities’ interconnectivity could help to assemble inter-scalar sites and relations of ethical responsibility.

## **Fairtrade Wine in South Africa**

Wine does not fit easily with traditional conceptions of what makes a legitimate Fairtrade production space, producer or product since it is difficult to connect “the ‘aristocratic’ image of fine wine ... [with] the egalitarian values of the Fair Trade movement” (Kleine 2008:118). Nonetheless, Fairtrade markets have seen a recent turn towards “quality” (Goodman and Herman 2015; Staricco 2017) alongside a questioning of who should qualify as a Fair Trade subject (Besky 2015) when large corporations and plantations are now engaging in a system originally focused on small-scale producers and co-operative systems (Trauger 2014). This means that a focus on the wine sector offers useful insights into these recent trends for value-added, luxury Fairtrade consumables alongside production spaces that challenge Fairtrade’s founding global spatial imaginary (Naylor 2014).

South Africa was the first Fairtrade wine producing country, with certification standards introduced in 2003, and it presents a highly complex and contextual arena of racialised, politicised and emotive socio-economic and cultural relations,

structures and practices. Fairtrade in this space is not responding to an abstract ethical demand “but must account for the material histories and contemporary networks of deprivation, exploitation and inequality”, working through a post-colonial conceptualisation of responsibility, which acknowledges that “encounters do not take place in a space free from history or power” (Popke 2007:512–514). However, Fairtrade’s global standardisation struggles to acknowledge the challenges inherent to translating it into different places (Besky 2015) or the local determinations that modify and qualify it (Staricco 2017). Understanding its contexts is critical to holistically engaging with the processes of Fairtrade, considering how they impact and building effective relations between the disparate stakeholders. Fairtrade is an ongoing project that needs connections and commitment across geographical, social and cultural otherness; understanding the South African context in which the subsequent discussion is set is therefore important.

It has been over 25 years since apartheid ended in South Africa and, despite the optimism surrounding the post-apartheid transition, the country continues to face significant and enduring socio-economic and political challenges. High crime rates, endemic HIV-Aids, social unrest, political cronyism and corruption allegations shape a national context of privilege and alienation, which remains highly unequal and racialised (Bundy 2014; Ruhlmann 2013). The socio-economic legacies of apartheid persist with Madlingozi (2007) arguing that landlessness, poverty and wage disparities have actually worsened in the post-apartheid era. Therefore, despite state efforts to build housing, improve education and provide social grants and free basic utilities (Kearney and Odusola 2011), social development across South Africa remains mixed. While the post-apartheid transition brought significant political restructuring, it combined this radical shift in values with a conservative continuation of late-apartheid economic policies (Bundy 2014). Ultimately, this has led critics to question whether South Africa is post-apartheid or simply post-1994 (Maré 2014).

For the wine industry this situation is nuanced by its particular history of marginalisation, dispossession and subjugation (Brown et al. 2003; Ewert and Du Toit 2005). While conditions have improved for the black and coloured farmworkers with the introduction of health and safety, collective bargaining and freedom of association, the operationalisation of these remains difficult in an industry where the white elite, “renowned for circumnavigating legislative and voluntary initiatives in order to maintain the status quo” (McEwan and Bek 2009:735), retains control. Farmworkers are often also farm-dwellers, dependent on the owner of the private farm space for access to many everyday resources including education, transport, tenure, living and working conditions, utilities, mail and medical care (see Herman 2018). In an industry under pressure from global forces of competition and national politics of post-apartheid transformation, farmer-owners aiming to maintain economic viability are moving away from their formerly neo-paternalistic roles (Du Toit et al. 2008). The impact of the post-apartheid transition on farmworkers can therefore best be described as ambiguous (Bek et al. 2007).

FTI was keen to support change in the new South Africa (Lamb 2008) and so, after being approached by a group of South African wine producers who wanted

to facilitate market access for their commercial farms (Barrientos and Dolan 2006), introduced Fairtrade certification for wine grapes in 2003, with a focus on hired labour, plantation-style systems. The rigorous and external auditing offered by Fairtrade was attractive to the wine industry as it protected genuine participants in the still white-dominated industry and offered a way to gain political credibility and market position (Kruger and Du Toit 2006; Moseley 2008). On-farm relations remain grounded in deeply ingrained social constructions of black and white identities (Du Toit 1993; Williams 2005) with farmers retaining a fierce sense of independence and control over the place and population of the farm (Ewert and Du Toit 2005). Managers and farmer-owners are therefore critical in shaping how Fairtrade is experienced, and the extent to which workers are able to be empowered in these spaces (Fairtrade International 2015). As such, Fairtrade remains embedded within the broader landscapes of power that structure the South African farm (see Herman 2014, 2018).

In order to understand the experiences, relations and perspectives that shape Fairtrade production spaces, I undertook a qualitative, multi-sited study based on extended fieldwork in the Western Cape, South Africa (January–April 2015). I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with industry and state representatives alongside 15 interviews with farm owners and management, focus groups with 50, and photo elicitation with 20, farmworkers. These were across three hired labour organisations, which produce wine grapes and wine that have been certified Fairtrade since 2005 (HL A), 2008 (HL B) and 2013 (HL C). All interviews were conducted in English, while a local translator and facilitator was used to work with the farmworkers. For the global regulator perspective, the discussion draws on semi-structured interviews conducted in May 2015 with four representatives of FTI based in the “International Development” and “Standards and Pricing” units in Bonn, Germany. Interviews and focus groups ranged from 35 to 85 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. All research materials were repeatedly and systematically read, and then inductively coded in NVivo.

## **Challenges and Opportunities in Fairtrade Communities**

Three key findings emerge from the empirical material. Firstly, dialogical communication is critical to establishing more inclusive and legitimate Fairtrade operations, which need to acknowledge and engage with the intersubjective nature of “being-with” stakeholders, and resist a project of ideological fusion and homogenisation. Secondly, international communities such as Fairtrade need an active and informed membership. Impactful participation is essential to building a practised, shared and respectful understanding between socio-economically and geographically disparate stakeholders. Finally, a system built on solidarity and cultural synthesis rather than benevolence would make space for a more open learning environment. This would allow for the co-authorship of Fairtrade’s fundamental ideals and practices that is necessary to build a connective politics within the system.

## *Dialogical Communication*

For Schwarzmantel (2007:465) a community—such as Fairtrade—is a “continual process, rather than some fixed goal or unchanging values which recalcitrant elements must accept”. Communication is critical to engaging with this idea of community as “a social project rather than a geographical given or utopian dream ...” (Gibson-Graham 2005:121). Historically producers, as the ultimate beneficiaries of Fairtrade, played a central role in FTI’s international community (McDermott 2013; Renard 2005). However, following the creation from 1988, proliferation and finally unification in 1997 of the national Fairtrade labelling systems, producers were decentred (Bennett 2015; Renard 2015). Even though producers were included as members of FTI in 2006 and equal owners in 2011, issues around diversity, inclusivity and communication remain (Bennett 2015, 2017), while the conventionalisation and institutionalisation of the system make it difficult for producers to challenge the status quo (Renard 2015; Wilson and Mutersbaugh 2015).

FTI makes efforts to overcome these issues through grounding its standards and prices in global consultations (for details, see Herman 2019c), meaning that it identifies itself as a “very consultative movement” because “our standards are not written from Bonn, our standards are as a result of a long, laborious, detailed, documented consultative process” (International Development Director, FTI, Interview, 2015). This is important since, for a community to be stronger than just a group of individuals living under a common institution, links of mutual respect and shared understanding need to be built (Schwarzmantel 2007). A community is therefore continuously created as a product of practices (*ibid.*), “a process of recognising what works and what doesn’t, and by improving what works participants gain valuable ideas about what futures can be brought into being” (Clope and Conradson 2018:368). As such, “community” offers a space to explore the dynamics of negotiating power differentials and relations within a group of heterogeneous stakeholders. The global Fairtrade community therefore requires communication and dialogical practices in order to be effective, inclusive and sustainable, recognising the interdependency of all its stakeholders who have “responsibility for the wellbeing of others because of their mutual ‘being-in-common’” (Popke 2009:442). However, as the Head of Standards (FTI, Interview, 2015) acknowledged, not all producers are involved in FTI’s consultations and even the regional producer networks lack the capacity to represent all the diverse interests that constitute their geographical remit (Bennett 2015).

As such, a gap between regulatory and production spaces remains with both South African farmers and representatives of Fairtrade Africa commenting on the neo-colonial nature of Fairtrade. As one Fairtrade certified wine grape farmer (HL A, Interview, 2015) reflected:

... we discussed the issues with Fairtrade in Cape Town at their head office and they almost throw their hands up and he said “but look, the standards aren’t set here, the standards are set in Germany, we’re just here to see that they’re complied with” and that I think also is wrong, because every country is different ... and they want to have a blanket set of standards that covers the whole world and everybody must comply with the same and it doesn’t work like that.

Similarly, a Fairtrade Liaison Officer at Fairtrade Africa (Interview, 2015) argued that:

... it's still a North to South relationship. As much as they do studies research, etc., here on producer level, decisions and perspectives and paradigms are created, maintained up North ... Fairtrade, because if you really want to go elementary on it, it's again a European, it's like a spaceship landing. This is what we want and to see you doing.

There is therefore a sense that the European certifiers have limited knowledge through a lack of interaction, which has established structures and relations that are disempowering for those in producer spaces. There is a perception that decision-making remains very centralised and yet, as Devisch (2002:389) reflects, being "worldwide doesn't stand for the taking place of an abstract humanity but signifies that every *there is* is always localized. Something is only in its localization ...". In Fairtrade, recognising that "the world *is* a diversity, but there is no 'unity in diversity'" (ibid.) positions the global Fairtrade system as always heterogeneous and also local (Massey 2004). From the South African perspective, however, Fairtrade neither adequately engages with its diversity nor makes space for producer voices. This leads to the experience of meeting Fairtrade standards, or being audited, as a relation of instrumental "power over" rather than a more associational "power with". For some, this has contributed to their withdrawal from the Fairtrade system. While de-listing is unusual (FLO-CERT, Interview, 2015), it primarily occurs due to an economically unsustainable combination of poor sales and continuing certification costs as emphasised by these no longer certified producers:

But if there's not wine sales there's no way you can get to their standards ... We just couldn't afford Fairtrade any more for one thing, and another thing is they're making it more and more difficult year by year to do what I need to do outside to get healthy grapes ... they mustn't miss the point about are we looking after the people if we can't produce a product that sells? (De-listed Farm Manager, Interview, 2015)

Fairtrade is voluntary therefore I really think that employers who are willing to meet Fairtrade standards should be supported and encouraged, and not pushed down because if I, as an employer, can no longer take the pressure, everything will fall flat. For those who are prepared to do Fairtrade in South Africa, Fairtrade must realise that everything turns around the employer and they should also protect them ... Maybe it is time that the head of Fairtrade comes to South Africa and really sees what concerns us. (De-listed Farmer, Letter, 2015)

In both of these instances a sense of re-establishing control over their producer spaces and practices is clear with the feelings of disconnection from the Fairtrade system playing a role both in how they experienced Fairtrade and why they chose to delist. To ensure inclusion and buy-in, Fairtrade must not be practised as a "project of fusion" (Nancy 1991b:15) by regulators. Following Milligan and Wiles (2010), I argue that to practice responsibility in a globalised and interconnected world requires FTI to actively acknowledge its "being-with" and systemic intersubjectivity. Knowledge, information and communication are critical to enacting a

politics of connectivity and extending relations of care and responsibility (Massey 2004; Popke 2006). For Fairtrade, therefore, overcoming the disconnections exacerbated by a professionalised bureaucracy (Renard 2015) and addressing the asymmetries of socio-political power within its governance structures and exchanges (Herman 2019a; Naylor 2018) are critical to fostering participatory and inclusive discussions as to how Fairtrade ensures it is ethical and responsible. Cloke and Conradson (2018:369) comment:

At heart, in-common ethics rely on the insistence that “being” is inextricably intertwined with “being with” (Nancy 1991b), and that relational agencies of co-presence in time and space can develop into forms of in-commonness that help to assemble sites of ethical responsibility.

However, the current state of “co-presence” in Fairtrade networks is uneven and so this arguably represents a challenge, given the asymmetries between the different communities within Fairtrade. As Naylor (2018) argues current relations prioritise proximity between the certifier and consumer, with no communication campaigns focused on producers. How then can Fairtrade assemble “sites of ethical responsibility” when its structures are reinforcing distance and uneven power and privilege between and within its constituent communities? To start to break this down, Fairtrade needs to actively engage with the political, “the site where what it means to *be* in common is open to definition” (Inston 2016:187). Being-in-common is practised through the co-operative activity of social subjects in spaces and relations that allow for the development of different kinds of thinking and encounter (McGarry 2015). For Fairtrade to engage with a politics of connectivity, it requires this openness and capacity to disrupt and change the ongoing project of “being-with” within its networks. This would be supported by a sense of common responsibility and ideals, which—drawing on Freire’s pedagogical work—requires reciprocal and dialogical practices of communication, listening and learning, to allow all stakeholders to co-create the Fairtrade system in which they exist. This is an ongoing project, which requires some practical activity since “being-with”, a multi-directional sense of commonality that fosters relations of compassion and inclusion, is a shared accomplishment that requires effort (Conradson 2003).

### ***Impactful Participation***

The previous section highlighted that even relatively privileged actors in this production context, the South African farmers, felt a sense of disconnection, which has resulted in a less active membership despite FTI’s continuing efforts to promote participation and so enhance legitimacy (Bennett 2016; Schwarzmantel 2007). Fairtrade’s communities cut across scales as well as interests so exploring the local or farm level is also critical to considering Fairtrade’s contexts, power relations, challenges and opportunities.

Knowledge and communication, as emphasised above, are key constituents for a connected community grounded in being-in-common. These are also the building blocks for informed action. Amongst South African farmworkers there was

some discrepancy in their understandings of Fairtrade itself; a clear definition of the latter is arguably fundamental to their capability to actively engage in Fairtrade practices within local and broader communities. Some—usually those engaged in Fairtrade governance at the farm level—had a clear and detailed knowledge of Fairtrade ideals and the larger network (Focus Groups, HL B, 2015): “Fairtrade stands for fairness ... There must not be inequality, we must all be treated equally”; “I tell people about the price and the extra money the overseas buyers are paying for our wine”.

However, others remained confused over exactly what it was and Fairtrade’s role on the farm. This indicates ongoing power relations within the community, with certain individuals continually occupying key roles. While this minimises the loss of institutional capacity, it also limits opportunities for others to participate and so can exacerbate power imbalances and knowledge asymmetries within the community (Phillips 2014). In the HL context, which dominates South African Fairtrade production, activity and so power centres on the Fairtrade Premium Committee (FPC). This manages the social premium on behalf of all workers, and has to ensure transparent administration, regular communication and participatory decision-making (Fairtrade International 2014). While all the farms researched ran regular information and training sessions alongside community meetings and democratic elections, concerns about communication and power imbalances were apparent:

... if you are not part of the Fairtrade group or the meetings then you don’t know what to think. The things that are talked about in these meetings are not shared with us. You don’t know enough to understand the things that happen on the farm, so you think it must be because of Fairtrade. (Fairtrade Farmworker, Focus Group, HL B, 2015)

Farmworker 1: ... the way I see it, the people on the Joint Body are not all the right people, we now sit with people in charge that don’t belong there.

Farmworker 2: We do have one or two that have gone through some training, but the problem is, now they think they know everything and want to take charge of everything ...

Farmworker 3: So, they do represent us but they need more training to communicate and lead the community better in future. (Focus Group, HL A, 2015)

Some workers expressed anxiety about participating in meetings alongside a desire for more in-depth understanding and “safe” spaces in which to ask questions, which highlights a continuing constraint on their active membership in this community. Workers argued that “it is not about the type of questions. Our people don’t feel comfortable to ask questions, this is our culture” (Focus Group, HL B, 2015). This highlights the ongoing legacies of apartheid, which continue to shape worker understandings and opportunities through essentialised identities and relations that govern what is considered possible (Herman 2018). These are also apparent in how the farmers engage with the farmworkers and FPCs since “to be a white farmer has been, for at least three hundred years, to be a “master”

(Ewert and Du Toit 2005:318). As such, instances emerged across the certified farms of farmers in their “mentor” roles on FPCs advising certain projects or purchases over others. Given that the farmers themselves do not directly benefit from the Fairtrade social premium, and yet still incur compliance costs, there is a strong motivation to guide workers towards what they perceive as “sensible” decisions even though these may conflict with the desires or interests of the workers. This results in an elite capture of control over what Fairtrade intends to be a democratic and empowering process that supports farmworker participation in the socio-economic development of their immediate community. While reflections from farmworkers on their relations with management do indicate that changes are taking place, these are slow. On-farm management structures need to better promote transparency and dialogue, allowing farmworkers to be active in governing their communities.

It must be acknowledged that farms are private spaces and capitalist enterprises, which limits both the willingness of farmer-owners to make changes that could negatively impact on profitability and the capability of farmworkers to push for such changes. South African wine industry bodies commented on the mistrust that governs farmworker-farmer relations at a regional/national level; together with the private nature of farms this manifests at a farm level in difficult access for worker bodies such as the Association For Fairness in Trade (AFIT) and the Centre for Rural Legal Studies (CRLS) who aim to promote capacity and community-building training:

... we do training on rights and, you know, how to handle all the changes you face on the farm, and stuff. But to try and build stronger communities between the different workers so that when we're not there, they've got some of the skills but they can support each other as well ... because we work with Fairtrade, they [farmers] think, OK, it's training and we need training to get our certificate and our audit, so it's all good ... when they start to see that it's having an impact on the power relations on the farm, then they start to get all stropky and miserable with us. (AFIT, Interview, 2015)

Freedom of association is a constitutional right but enforcing this in agriculture is further compounded by the remote and dispersed location of farms and limited communication services, which makes it hard for workers to organise or receive the necessary external support:

... we have labour legislation we can really work with ... [but] its built on the premise that there's an organised labour force and therefore that it has the ability to engage with and negotiate with the employers ... it further assumes that they are workers who know their rights, who are skilled in negotiations, who are skilled and understand the power dynamics and therefore would know when and how to negotiate and work within that context, and that's a huge assumption. (CLRS, Interview, 2015)

This emphasises continuing and significant structural constraints that shape worker-farmer relations; furthermore, the farmer-owner still retains ultimate, disciplinary control over decision-making. As such, however active farmworkers are at the farm level, as seen in the previous section control of Fairtrade accreditation

rests with the owner. FLO-Cert (Interview, 2015) commented that in a context of declining sales, ongoing certification costs and growing fatigue with regulators, it is increasingly hard to maintain “producer enthusiasm”. Furthermore, Producer Support (Fairtrade Africa) noted the delicate negotiations they have to manage between farmer-owners and farmworkers, who have benefitted in ways that, from the farmers’ perspective, have worsened on-farm relations:

So, they get into Fairtrade for a business case ... but at the moment when a lot of management sit with a shrinking market, high Fairtrade certification overheads and workers that are empowered to a point of militancy in the farmer perspective ... So now they are going “oh well we will be decertified” ... (Interview, 2015)

There are two key points to tease out here. Firstly, this highlights the heterogeneity of the “producer community”, which is often homogenised by Fairtrade marketing and auditing practices (Naylor 2017, 2018). For FTI—and other certification bodies—who is the “producer” that the system is aiming to support? In South Africa, is it the predominantly white farmer or the black/coloured farmworker? What happens when their interests collide? Secondly, the racialised South African context exacerbates the conflicting interests and potential for disconnection arguably present in all capitalist HL enterprises. Here, how do you promote “being-with” in a space that historically used state violence to formalise racial classification, restrict free movement, separate spaces and remove citizenship rights (Fioramonti 2012)? How can farmers and farmworkers still operating within highly racialised agrarian relations recognise, acknowledge and engage with intersubjectivity? The end of apartheid saw some significant changes for black and coloured farmworkers but these remain constrained in an industry that is still almost exclusively white in terms of control and ownership. Even “ethical” farmers struggle to move away from their traditional, paternalist roles that, although now more consultative, continue to perpetuate apartheid-era power and social relations (Ewert and Hamman 1999; Jackson 2014).

### ***Solidarity through Cultural Synthesis***

For Nancy, community is grounded in disruption and change but in South Africa significant social and structural forces act to maintain certain relations, practices and identities in an effort to homogenise and make static particular, racialised conceptions of how the community should operate. How Fairtrade intervenes and touches down in this space is therefore wrapped up in this ongoing and contentious process of (re)defining the community and (re)constituting the “we” that forms it (Inston 2016). Ideas and relations of the in-common emerge from the activity between singular subjects (Cloke and Conradson 2018) but for this to ensure an active and dialogical community within both South Africa and Fairtrade, the power asymmetries between elite and marginalised—constituted through space, race, capital and class—must be addressed. Popke (2007) argues that, to enact an ethics of community, recognising our interdependencies is essential but, for this to translate into engaged relations of responsibility within a mutable and diverse community, participation and conversation at all levels is critical (Maré 2014; Schwarzmantel 2007). What then can Fairtrade learn from this?

The encounters of both South African farmers and farmworkers highlight the multiple ways in which “out-of-commonness” (Cloke and Conradson 2018) with Fairtrade can be experienced. Cloke and Conradson (2018) note that the in-common emerges from co-operation, and such ideas of sharing, interaction, encounter and dialogue as key to developing ethicality are common in the literatures (Chen 2012; Popke 2007). How then can Fairtrade promote “being with” to develop more responsive responsibility within its multistakeholder and geographically extensive networks?

Following Freire, Fairtrade must not become the “oppressor” by adhering to conventional trade’s modes of governance, instead it needs to build a new model. Through dialogue and action with the marginalised and oppressed it was initially established to support, it needs to enact liberatory, connective praxis by fostering solidarity rather than benevolence-based approaches (Keahey 2016). As Freire (2005:77, 81) argues “solidarity requires true communication”, moving away from a “banking concept” of knowledge transfer to more problem-posing, horizontal learning spaces in which regulators, certifiers, farmer-owners and workers are “critical co-investigators”. In order to address the continuing democratic deficit of global governance systems people need a fundamental role in any transformation process (Gunderson 2018). This is acknowledged within FTI, where it is recognised that participation is critical to both legitimacy and sustainability; as the International Development Director (FTI, Interview, 2015) commented:

In my life all those projects that are 100% funded through grants they fail. I have examples from Zimbabwe, from Ghana, from many places where the person no matter how poor they are do not invest something in it, forget it ... So, we have all kinds of mechanisms to ensure that we include the poor in that, in fact most, some of our projects are just coming from poor producers ... I am on the phone with smallholder rice farmers in Katal in India ... They are angry with me, they say they are happy with me, so we are in this constant dialogue because at the end of the day as I say it’s about empowerment. Yeah, of course sometimes you empower people and they use it against you, that’s fair, it’s evidence of what we have done. So, when the people have, small people have a strong voice I have no problem with it, I am very happy indeed as an end point of our work.

However, these attempts to be more consultative are still grounded in the subjectification of producers as needing “fixing” and the disciplinary promotion of anti-political, unplaced and technocratic practices (Naylor 2017). Even participation in this reinforcement of “power-over” relations “depends also on the topic, if there’s something that producers care a lot about then they make their voices heard” (Head of Standards, FTI, Interview, 2015). Spatial or temporal difficulties further impact on FTI’s ability to reach certain producers, and develop co-presence; furthermore, as Gunderson (2018) argues, motivation to participate is lowered if people perceive that their views will have little impact on the decision. Despite the positive interactions the International Development Director perceived to have with certain producers, the evidence from South Africa suggests a continuing disconnect and disenfranchisement, which needs to be addressed.

As such, in its interactions with producers, Fairtrade must move away from an assimilation model in terms of “right” or “fair” practices, ideals or discourses (Keahey 2016; Schwarzmantel 2007) towards cultural synthesis (Freire 2005). More genuine co-authorship of the fundamentals grounding Fairtrade, not just its logistics or operations, is essential to approaching development, knowledge, trade and participation as “being-with”. Space for people “to come to feel like masters of their thinking” (Freire 2005:124) is essential for the dialogical action that is critical for Fairtrade’s legitimacy (Bennett 2016); after all, a revolution “for the people” is a revolution “without the people” (Freire 2005:127).

## **What Can Fairtrade Learn from Being-in-Common?**

How can you build such participatory places, relations of connection and being-in-common into a global system? Gunderson (2018), reflecting on the longstanding problem of scale for participatory approaches, proposes a network of deliberative systems made up of dispersed locations and practices. This connects into Lemeilleur and Allaire’s (2017) discussion of participatory guarantee systems (PGS), as adopted by the World Fair Trade Organisation. This decentralised and contextual approach builds in dialogue and local specificity to the creation and audit of standards but the inherent lack of homogeneity and common implementation makes them hard to commercialise (*ibid.*). Lemeilleur and Allaire (2017) note that local PGS can belong to global networks but could FTI become a federation of localised systems, held together through regular, holistic and multidirectional learning? Given that previous efforts to localise the FTI system have ultimately collapsed, for example with national Fairtrade organisations such as Fairtrade Label South Africa closing in 2017, it is arguable that the certified Fairtrade system has become too large and “of the market” to readily adapt to the messy and complicated network practices grounded in being-in-common.

FTI faces significant constraints in how it can operationalise more connective responsibility to distant others at all network nodes, including its scale, market focus and institutional inertia. There are perhaps two different opportunities here. Firstly, for FTI to reform by adopting more regular, local consultations that go beyond standards and pricing to the more fundamental ideals that govern Fairtrade. This could ground the formulation of a “People’s Fairtrade Charter”, drawing on the varied beliefs, interests and experiences of all stakeholders to create a living document that provides the foundations for system aims, practices and governance. Secondly, but relatedly, in order to return to the original values of Fair Trade, moving beyond FTI to build a new system that uses virtual spaces to adopt a commons approach to organisation, practices and ideals that emphasises learning, dialogue and solidarity. Not-for-profits, social enterprises, co-operatives, wikis and B-corporations, amongst others, offer a variety of models to consider for establishing a new platform, which moves away from corporatisation to place: “... critical thinking, reflexive dialogue, and consensus building at the center of the learning process, enabling people to connect ideas with lived experiences in order to improve knowledge and build multicultural solidarity” (Keahey 2016:410).

Power struggles would inevitably remain but this would establish more opportunities for those living with Fairtrade to engage in their own decision-making, to make and remake, to create and recreate its practices, systems, discourses and relations (Freire 2005). More continual and open ways of (re)defining Fairtrade makes space—to varying degrees—for the relational, communicative and active communities that are essential to building a politics of connectivity grounded in “being-in-common”. Decentralising in this way, allowing for interaction and sharing across interests and communities, would support Fairtrade to more effectively balance its universal ideals and placed contexts without “swallowing up” stakeholders.

## Conclusions

Building and negotiating relationships with care across the distances, spaces, interests, experiences and commodities that constitute Fair Trade is a longstanding challenge, which reaches beyond systems of ethical trade to more fundamental questions of how we identify and practice relations with and between Self and Other(s). A focus on some of the key relationships within Fairtrade, between South African wine industry farmworkers, farmer-owners and regulators, highlights the ongoing issues in practising the dialogical and inclusive governance that such international systems need for effective, sustainable and legitimate operations. Certified Fairtrade operates through a homogenising but marketable set of audited standards, and yet its encounters and practices do not take place in a vacuum. Its failure to connect with stakeholder contexts and the latter’s lack of voice within the system—whether of the farm or Fairtrade—have resulted in a sense of powerlessness and disconnection for many of the South African stakeholders. How Fairtrade negotiates this necessary balance between the global and local scales of its operations, taking into account disparate, emotive and politicised contexts, is critical to whether it is able to establish a more inclusive system or not.

South Africa, with its very particular and racialised context, highlights some of the innate challenges to fostering the emotional proximity and acknowledgement of intersubjectivity necessary to grounding “being-with” relations. Although apartheid ended over 25 years ago, its social and spatial legacies persist and the highly politicised and emotive experience of race in South Africa establishes structural constraints on individuals’ sense of subjectivity and relations with others. On certified farms, this is layered up with the additional barriers of class, capital and markets as encapsulated in the racialised ownership patterns and labour relations in agriculture, the nature of a HL system and trading within a global neoliberal economy. Fairtrade needs to challenge these in order to produce spaces of ethical responsibility in which equitable, caring and just beliefs are not divorced from their corresponding practices and impacts (Cloke et al. 2017); after all, the injustices Fairtrade responds to are not just perceived but lived (Williams 2016). As such, the challenges posed by engaging with being-in-common and intersubjectivity to promote an international politics of connectivity have implications for all those—whether development agencies, third sector bodies, certification systems

or trading organisations—that want to enact more equitable, caring and inclusive relations that are responsive to their stakeholders’ contexts, experiences and needs.

FTI has lost its foundation as a common project and so lost the strength that can come when “both the community and the citizen are constituted through the ongoing process of (re)defining the common” (Inston 2016:196). This fundamental sense needs to be (re)established in order to provide a platform that clearly demonstrates stakeholders’ shared goals, ideals and so solidarity; showing how they can “be with” without being reduced to the homogenising category of “producer” or “consumer”, or forced to adopt the disciplinary practices of a neo-colonial, assimilative model of Fair Trade. There are inherent challenges to building communities across distance, difference and scale, and the issues involved in engaging with three of the key foundations identified here—dialogical communication, impactful participation and solidarity through cultural synthesis—demonstrate the significant social and structural constraints.

Establishing a dialogue through engaging with Freire’s pedagogical ideas, either through reforming FTI or building a new system, offers a first step in fostering intersubjectivity alongside exciting possibilities in terms of disruption, openness and reciprocity. However, it also highlights the limits. How do you promote initial and continuing participation? What are the mechanisms for participation and who do they exclude? How do you operationalise dynamism and disruption in a way that still ensures solidarity and capability-building with marginalised stakeholders at all network nodes? Providing workable solutions to these longstanding challenges is beyond the scope of this research but it does open out some of the possibilities, and highlights that actively questioning what we value within a society and economy, and what we would like these to become, is a legitimate practice. Making space for stakeholders to become co-investigators in an ongoing and reflexive process of definition and praxis offers a clear way for Fairtrade to take a commons approach to its core discourses. This shift in power, which would be reflected in more representative and relational system governance, would help build a more caring and responsive system that is better placed to negotiate the balance between its global and local needs.

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