A TALE OF CHIAPAS: EXPOSING GEOGRAPHIES AND DEFETISHING MEXICAN-(INSERT LOCATION) COFFEE

Victor Ngo
University of British Columbia

Geography 361: Introduction to Economic Geography
Trevor Barnes
April 7, 2011
A Tale of Chiapas: Exposing Geographies and Defetishing Mexican-(Insert Location) Coffee

Introduction

“Chiapas, Mexico. The place you thought you knew.”
—Tourism Mexico

My commute every day on the 84 bus to the University of British Columbia campus provided me a fleeting glimpse of a place elsewhere. As part of a multi-million dollar campaign to promote tourism to Mexico, a giant bus shelter advertisement sat at the bus stop by Olympic Village Station that pictured the lush and pristine landscape of Chiapas. Enticing. A far cry from the glass metropolis that of Vancouver. I had been stuck in the city for too long and wanted to leave and travel abroad.

In February 2011 for school reading week, I travelled to Chiapas with five others for an international community service-learning opportunity to learn about sustainable development, solidarity, and social justice. I brought back a wealth of knowledge, countless bug bites on my legs, and a bag of coffee beans. Organic coffee. Grown locally. In Chiapas. But what does locally really mean? What does Chiapas mean? Or for that matter, what is coffee really?

Coffee, like any commodity, hides a geography and a set of social and material relationships. It is hidden, because the narratives of commodities—spanning from production to consumption—are often invisible to the consumer. As Karl Marx observes, “A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial, and easily understood” but in “its analysis [it] shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.” Committing the common mistake of perceiving the value of a commodity as inherent and intrinsic to itself, rather than the amount of labour expended to produce the commodity is to engage in commodity fetishism.

But how do we escape this?—what is the real life of the coffee I bought? Coffee is not simply just an item transacted in the marketplace. Who were the people involved? What were their stories? To answer such a question, I perform a commodity chain analysis based on ethnographic research conducted during my trip to Chiapas and detective work in Vancouver in order to “follow the thing” and defetishise the coffee. Through this, I uncover the social and geographical processes involved in the production and consumption of the bag of coffee I bought for 180 pesos in a place I thought I knew.

Chiapas: The Place I Thought I Knew (and the Coffee I Never Consumed Before)

To be frank, I did not know very much about Chiapas. Aside from the bus shelter advertisement and reading briefly about the Zapatista movement in Cloke, Crang, and Goodwin's *Introducing Human Geographies* for an undergraduate geography course, I did not know much. But that was part of the allure of travelling to a new place. However, as with anything, there always come unexpected surprises. Chiapas was not simply a lush and pristine landscape, but it was of a place of people. And you cannot truly understand the lived experiences of people simply by reading. You must inhabit the same spaces as them.

---

1 Marx (1868), 163.
More importantly, you must talk. Have conversations. Immerse yourself in the thickness of people's everyday experience.

February 11. My flight departed from Vancouver to Los Angeles. After three hours of waiting at LAX, I left to Mexico City. By the time I landed, it was a new day and five o'clock in the morning. I quickly scurried to find a place to sleep at Mexico City International Airport to prepare myself for an excruciating nine-hour layover. By one o'clock, I arrived in the capital city of Chiapas, Tuxtla Gutiérrez. There was another four-hour travel by car in order to reach my final destination in Tzimol, a small town of 11,925 people.

**The Coffee Buyer**

For my international community service-learning trip, I volunteered at the non-profit organization Centro Solidario Tsomanotik (Solidarity Centre Tsomanotik). Tsomanotik is an eco-agricultural centre for just and sustainable community development and runs intercultural and community solidarity projects in Tzimol and the nearby city of Comitan, a half hour drive away. Living and working at a seven-acre farm for a week, I learned about the region's story from various social, political, economic, environmental perspectives, and interacted with the local youth and residents.

The only thing I purchased during my time was a bag of coffee beans. I purchased it from Bet, the co-founder of Tsomanotik. A motherly figure. She coordinated my educational experience and provided my group and I accommodations and food during my stay. I was informed my purchase would help benefit children at a local boy's orphanage in Tzimol that Tsomanotik supported. The Casa Hogar orphanage housed 30 boys with three nuns being responsible for their well-being. Unfortunately, the nuns did not possess the proper training to raise and educate them properly. Furthermore, the orphanage only received a total of $100 Canadian monthly from the Mexican government. Not $100 per boy as it was clearly emphasized to me by Bet, but $100 for the entire shelter. Tsomanotik acted as a retailer, with Bet and Daniel (her husband and the other co-founder) buying the coffee directly from farmers and selling it to other businesses, organizations, and people in Tzimol and Comitan. And I was one of them. Profits generated from sales would be directed to improving conditions at Casa Hogar.

Organic Arabica beans. Handmade. Made 1250 metres above sea level in the forest. Weighed 1 kg. Produced by "alternative jungle producers" and processed in Mexico. By Café Tziscao. The simple act of buying coffee instantly connected me to a network I never knew existed. I purchased it partly because I wanted to help the orphanage. It was better that buying at the local Starbucks back home and giving more money to another vast and rich multinational corporation. But also partly the fact that I wanted to bring something back home with me that was Chiapas. The commodity in my hand captured the taste of a landscape. Chiapas was round. Rich and delicate. Crisp, with a refreshing finish. But who were the people that benefitted from my purchase, directly and indirectly?

**The Orphans**

I had the chance to meet the boy orphans. Along with everyone at Tsomanotik, we travelled to the El Chiflon waterfalls together located an hour away from Tzimol for sightseeing and recreation. I spent the entire afternoon playing with the boys in the river downstream from the waterfall. I “talked” (and what I actually mean by that is communicating using hand signals and through rough translation) to a few of the
boys and learned their stories. Earlier, Bet informed us some of the boys had run away from the orphanage. This would inevitably expose them to the dangers of the streets and the possibility of being caught up into the human trafficking trade.

In retrospect, what struck me the most was the money I spent buying the coffee seemingly had no relevance at the time. I was too busy having fun and ensuring all the boys were having a good time. The commodity became tangled up and lost within a larger set of social relations. For all intent and purposes, my purchase was meaningless. But that is incorrect. My purchase did matter. Only, it was not tangible and readily apparent to me at the time. I would not be able to see the power of my purchase until I had left Mexico. With my money, perhaps Casa Hogar would have more resources so the boys would not run away again. I do not know.

To crystallize this connection—preventing it from seeping behind the veil of fog that Marx warned of—is important in understanding the commodity and its implications. Partly I do this by committing it to writing—simultaneously injecting, making, and engaging critical (geographical and social) knowledge.3 But also, just by being aware of such a thing is happening.

**The Coffee Producer**

Café Tziscao. An hour and a half away from Tzimol. Located in the region of Lagunas de Montebello (Lakes of Montebello) at an altitude of 1200 m in the transition between the plateau Comiteca and the Lacandon jungle. It is a beautiful place. The local language of the region is the Mayan language Chuj.

![Figure 1. Location of Tziscao. Source: Los Lagos de Colores SSS, http://displega.com/cafetziscao/](http://displega.com/cafetziscao/)

There, my group and I spoke with Isidro, a coffee farmer with Café Tziscao. He is the leader of the Cooperative Tziscao consisting of about 40 local farmers who have partnered with the Producers

---

3 Cook and Crang (1996), 41.
Cooperative Society Alternative Forest (PAS SC) and the sister group of the Social Solidarity Society, Los Lagos de Colores.4

These partnerships and collectives are emblematic of solidarity, a word that is very loaded in the Spanish language, particularly in the Chiapas region home to the Zapatista movement. Unlike the Fordist-Taylorist duo, solidarity emphasizes horizontally integrated production where both men and women (indigenous and non-indigenous) participate equally. It attempts to blur social stratification, i.e., the have and the have-nots. For my community service-learning, Bet emphasized that I was not here as a Canadian to help Mexicans as it carries the implication of unequal power relations, but rather, I was there to participate in unity with everyone. Cooperative earnings are reinvested directly into the communities and the joint development of coffee production. Tsomanotik and Café Tziscao were not just sites of environmental sustainability, but also sites of social sustainability.

To this end, Cooperative Tziscao partners with an exporter (another cooperative), Maya Vinic in order to negotiate deals. They are comprised of over 500 coffee farming families.5 Every April, exportation contracts are confirmed and coffee beans produced by Isidro and his farmers are sent out to the global marketplace. Isidro noted last year in 2010 they produced about 250 quintales (1 quintal equals to 57.5 kg) of coffee, the majority going to Switzerland. The coffee was also exported to eastern Canada and the United States.

**Political Economy**

Crucial to understanding labour, and consequently coffee production, is the effects of the Zapatista movement. The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) is a revolutionary leftist group demanding indigenous rights and the democratization of Mexican civil and political society. Going public on January 1, 1999, the day when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect, the Zapatista movement is a critique of the ever-continuing pace of neoliberal globalization.

Wills notes the Zapatistas have engendered a new approach to protest by speaking to all those negatively affected by or disenchanted with neoliberal globalization.6 Klein observes how Chiapas has transformed itself through the Zapatista movement:

“In Canada, where I’m from, indigenous uprising is always symbolized by a blockade: a physical barrier to stop the golf course from being built on a native burial site, to block the construction of a hydroelectric dam or to keep an old growth forest from being logged. The Zapatista uprising was a new way to protect land and culture: rather than locking out the world, the Zapatistas flung open the doors and invited the world inside. Chiapas was transformed, despite its poverty, despite being under constant military siege, into a global gathering place for activists, intellectuals, and indigenous groups.”7

---

4 Café Tziscao (2010).
5 Cooperative Coffees (2010).
6 Wills (2004).
Isidro and his family began growing coffee in 1972 with the assistance of the Mexican Coffee Institute (INMECAFE). After the 1989 demise of the 1983 International Coffee Agreement\(^8\), an international commodity agreement that aimed to strike a balance between the supply and demand of coffee, the INMECAFE was abolished. This further precipitated the need for local cooperatives in order to adjust to the increasing cost of coffee and provide a steady income to both growers and sellers.

The solidarity movement grew stronger after the nation walked down the path of economic liberalization through the signing of NAFTA. This began having the effect of undercutting local prices of key staples such as corn by heavily subsidized US corn. With a new game in town, producers subsequently had to adjust to the new rules. In doing so, solidarity and collectivity became firmly rooted in Chiapan culture and production.

*The Thing: Coffee*

There are twelve varieties of coffee at Café Tziscao. Different sizes, colours, and maturation times. I tasted four. Harvesting is from November to March. The more sun the coffee plant receives, the sweeter it is. Each tree itself can live up to about 30 years.

And why organic? Isidro cites that it was a practice handed down from his father, and the fact that it is more environmentally friendly. Organic certification takes place annually in September. If a cooperative is to receive a certificate, all farmers must pass the organic certification process.

In order to prepare the coffee from the plant, the coffee fruit is picked off the plant and the bean is extracted. The beans are then left to dry in the sun for at least 24 hours. Afterwards, the bean is washed three times and left to dry again for another 36 hours. The dried beans are skinned, sent to the roasting plant, and subsequently packaged. This process takes ten days to finish. It is then shipped and consumed.

**Conclusion**

From its production in Tziscao and purchase at Tzimol, and to its travel from San Cristóbal de las Casas to Mexico City to Houston, and finally to Vancouver, the bag of coffee I bought for 180 pesos had a long journey. But alternate geographies exist as well. To Switzerland. To the United States. To Canada. It is not simply Mexican coffee. It is Mexican-Vancouver coffee. It is Mexican-Switzerland coffee. Hence the name of this paper. By assigning such names, I emphasize the importance of not just the commodity’s site of production, but also its site of consumption. These two processes are inextricably linked, embedded within larger social, cultural, political, and economic frameworks, and tied to very human networks.

A commodity chain analysis demonstrates how a chain consists of an interlinked set of separate processes, embedded in a history and geography, and how precarious and dynamic the chain can be. As an economic actor grounded in the intricacies of place, my actions have enabled the creation of a possibly new network. Has the Café Tziscao coffee ever been in Vancouver? I do not know. There exists a myriad of possible commodity geographies waiting to be constituted, enacted, molded, shaped, and disintegrated, all guided by broader contours of global travel and market demand. Exposing commodity geographies is truly multifarious and astounding as it reveals the endless depth and breadth of place-specific connections.

---

\(^8\) Bacon (2005).
bodies, and social linkages. The very coffee I possess is the same one someone in Switzerland has. I will never meet them, but we already share a common link.

The bag of coffee beans still sits in my house, awaiting consumption. Will I decide to open the bag and consume the commodity I purchased? To partake in the full splendor and tastefulness of its life and death? It is uncertain. I know too much about it.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank my group members from UBC I travelled with, Danielle, Emily, Rebecca, Suzanne, and Zahida, for the countless memories and continued support throughout the trip. Furthermore, Suzanne and Zahida's notes during our visit at Café Tzsicoa were immensely helpful in the writing of this article. I owe a huge gratitude to Bet and Daniel and everyone at Tsomanotik for their utmost kindness and hospitality. I will never forget what you did for us.
References


